

The Fragile Swindler

It was the kind of wearisome day where it had been raining since morning, extinguishing any desire to go out. Rainy days were becoming more and more often since entering the last weeks of September. One's wet umbrella had barely any time to dry before being drenched again.

It was past three in the afternoon when the doorbell in the Nishiyama Detective Agency rang. Michitoshi Oe was in the middle of typing up an investigation report on his computer. The template made his work easier, but he was not very skilled at composition to begin with. Twenty years of doing it had not made him like it any better. A sigh escaped his lips every time he got stuck on a sentence.

Oe continued to work, figuring Nobeoka the clerk would deal with any guests. These kinds of tiresome tasks tended to become even more tiresome if interrupted partway through.

The bell continued to ring—two, three times.

"Nobeoka, my man, there's someone at the door."

There was no answer. Oe tilted his head in perplexity. Something was wrong. Then, he remembered. About fifteen minutes ago, Nobeoka had told him that he was going out to "buy coffee, and all sorts of other stuff we've run out of". Oe had brushed him off with an absent-minded answer and completely forgotten.

The chief was absent, and his junior Katori was out investigating. Oe emitted a long sigh, and reluctantly rose out of his chair.

The bell rang incessantly. *Someone's in a rush*, Oe griped mentally as he pulled the door open widely towards him.

"Hello, this is Nishiyama Detective Agency."

In front of him was a chest clad in a white shirt. Oe had to look up to see his face. The man was towering. He looked young—in his late twenties, perhaps.

"I want you to find someone," the man said curtly.

"You're here to request a search, then. Come on in." As Oe ushered him into the office, he spotted the dirty umbrella in the man's hand.

"Oh, if you would put your umbrella in the umbrella stand over there—"

The man shoved his clear plastic umbrella roughly into the stand. When Oe offered him a seat on the sofa, he seated himself squarely in the middle. The man was not only tall; he also had long legs. His knees were bent uncomfortably in the confined space between the sofa and coffee table. Oe sat down across from him.

Out of his usual habit, Oe discreetly checked his visitor's clothes and accessories. The man's watch was a typical fake, the logo one letter off from the actual brand. He was wearing canvas basketball shoes on his feet. His white short-sleeved shirt was spotless and pressed neatly, and his black pants were kept in good condition with no strangely shiny spots. The simple design of his top and bottoms made his outfit look almost like a student's summer uniform.

The man's hair was short. It suited him, but the style was far from modern. His plain outfit and hairstyle gave him the kind of classic atmosphere of an actor in youth films back in the sixties, when Nikkatsu and Daiei were in their heyday. Oe wondered if the man dressed like this on purpose, but his watch was too pitiful for that, and his shoes did not match his outfit.

"Please let me introduce myself. I'm Michitoshi Oe, an investigator at Nishiyama Detective Agency. Would I be able to get your name?"

"Kei Kitagawa," the man answered. When Oe asked for his age, he replied, "Thirty-four."

He looked much younger than his age. His head was small, and the structure of his brow and nose was well-balanced. He no doubt fell into “handsome” category, but the man’s face was sorely lacking in expression. It was hard to discern what he was thinking.

Clients who came to detective agencies came because they were all more or less “troubled” about something. They came in with uncertain faces, angry faces; those who were weak-willed were often nervous out of their wits at being in a detective agency. This man fitted none of these patterns.

Whether he was brave or simply ignorant, Oe would soon find out by talking to him. He got a clipboard ready and prepared to take notes.

“So you were saying you were looking for someone. Let me assure you that we would be very happy to be of help to you. Allow me to jump right in. Could you tell me what kind of person it is you’re searching for—name, age, your relationship with this person—with as much detail as you can?”

Oe quit his company after two years to join the detective agency, where he was now fast into his twenty-fourth year. He was turning forty-eight this year. His long work relationship with Nishiyama, the chief, had given Oe a certain level of power to make decisions based on his own discretion.

No matter what kind of request it was, they were not to accept it until they had heard the story first. This was because some clients asked for things that were completely beyond the boundaries of common sense. Once, a mother had come in asking them to find her son. When she elaborated, they discovered that the son was in fact missing in the mountains. His body had not been recovered, and they had already performed his funeral five years ago without a body. The mother, still wanting to find it nevertheless, had come to them with this request. Live bodies were one thing, but searching for a dead body was beyond the field of detective work. In the end, they politely backed out of her request.

“The man I want you to find is an acquaintance,” the man said. “His name is Takafumi Douno. He turns thirty-six this year.” The man spoke abruptly, in a low voice. Oe took down the important points and predicted this man’s situation from previous experience. When men sought other male acquaintances, it most likely had to do with borrowed money.

“When and how did you meet Mr. Douno?”

“We first met six years ago. Douno came into the cell where I was living, in prison.”

Oe’s hand naturally stopped at the word “prison”. He looked up. Even when their eyes met, Kitagawa’s expression did not change. Oe slowly looked down again to avoid giving away his agitation. He had handled a number of clients in the past with criminal histories, but Kitagawa was lacking in the outlaw, devil-may-care attitude that was so common to them.

Oe felt the tension mount at his own cookie-cutter questions. He did not know what kind of crime this man had committed, but perhaps he was prone to angry outbursts. Caution was necessary.

“So this Mr. Douno whom you were in prison with—can you tell me why you’re looking for him?”

“Because I want to see him.”

Oe slowly twiddled his ballpoint pen from side to side.

“But there are a lot of reasons you might want to see him. For example, maybe you two had some money-related disagreement in prison.”

“I want to see Douno because he’s someone I like.”

Oe furrowed his brow. One would not normally pay the staggering detective fees to find an average, friendly acquaintance.

I liked her back in school. I want you to find a teacher who was good to me when I was a student. Oe could understand those kinds of requests. But the client and the sought person were both prisoners. What kind of respect could you have for a fellow prisoner? Oh, maybe if he was a prisoner who reflected on what he did, felt true remorse, and became a reformed man. If he was the type to be well-liked for his lofty morals, I could still understand where he's coming from.

"You said you first met him six years ago. When was the last time you saw him?"

"Spring of the next year, about a month before he was set to be released."

The two had interacted for less than a year, and had a five year gap of no contact. Oe knitted his brow. Searching for people and their whereabouts became more difficult as more time passed.

"Did you and Mr. Douno exchange addresses before he was released?"

Kitagawa narrowed his eyes slightly.

"In prison, inmates get punished if they exchange addresses. The guy who gets out first could fraud the other guy's family out of their money while he's still in prison. Or, if they're thieves, they'll team up and pull heists together."

"I see," was all Oe could say. Everything in the man's first-hand account of prison was new to him.

"It's forbidden," the man continued, "but it basically means you have to make sure you don't get caught or ratted out. If you write it down, it'll get caught during spot check. Everyone used to memorize everything. I was thinking of asking Douno for his address, but I got thrown into a secure cell before he was released, and I didn't get to talk to him at all."

Oe felt chilled. He did not know what a secure cell was, but from the tone of the conversation, he could imagine it was not a place where a well-behaved inmate would be put.

"Then, can you tell me everything you know about Mr. Douno? Anything will do. Even if you don't know his exact address, it can be a prefecture, or even east or west Japan."

"I don't know. Douno never mentioned anything."

Oh, come on, Oe groaned inwardly. Detectives weren't perfect. If he was given no information, he could not even begin to think about where and how to begin looking.

"Didn't you discuss any personal things with Mr. Douno?"

Kitagawa seemed to lower his gaze slightly.

"I talked about myself. But Douno didn't say anything."

Oe posed him a few more questions. He found out that Douno had a younger sister, and that she and both his parents were alive and well, and that he had a lover whom he was planning to marry, but nothing else.

"Did you hear about what kind of job Mr. Douno had before he got into prison?"

"City hall."

Amidst all the things Kitagawa claimed he did not know, this one was a quick answer. An occupation needing technical skill or qualification would create the possibility of Douno resuming a job in the same field; however, with city hall, once he was let go, he would never be able to go back. The potential path of finding him by his occupation ended abruptly and unceremoniously.

Oe stroke his chin, looking intently at his clipboard.

"His name, his age, and his former job is all we have. If you met each other in prison, you probably wouldn't have photos. Allow me to tell you the truth: it would be very difficult to find Mr. Douno."

Deep creases appeared between Kitagawa's eyebrows. He had given up before even searching—Oe could understand why the man would be displeased.

"I'll pay. I want you to find him."

Oe hunched his shoulders slightly and spread his palms open.

"It's not about the money. There are too few clues in the information you've given me, Mr. Kitagawa. I have nothing to narrow my focus on. If you'll allow me to speak from past experience, the probability of finding someone in these circumstances is extremely low. Investigation also doesn't come cheap. It's best if you save your money for something else rather than a fruitless search."

"You're a detective. Isn't it your job to find people?"

"Yes, but we're not all-powerful. If there's no information, there's no way even we can find him."

Oe sensed the man purse his lips in an angry line. Sensing the enormous torso slowly bend forward, he reflexively jumped backwards on the sofa. He had a feeling he was about to be punched.

"I'm begging you. Please find him," the man pleaded, his forehead and hands touching the table in front of him. Oe stood up hastily and approached him.

"Please, lift your face, Mr. Kitagawa."

The man slowly lifted his head. He did not so much as blink. Oe began to feel flustered, fixed with the man's desperate gaze.

"The detective agency I went to last week, and another one the week before, both turned me down and told me they couldn't find him. I don't care how much it costs. I want you to find him, please."

The tension radiating from the man was unsettling. Oe glanced left and right as if seeking help, but all of the other workers were out. He was the only one here.

"Just as the other agencies have told you, it will be difficult finding him."

No matter how much explaining Oe did, the man only stubbornly responded with, "Please find him." The conversation was going nowhere. Oe tried to think of an excuse that would send him home at least for the day.

"To tell you the truth, even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to take on your case on my own decision," Oe explained. "All the power lies with the chief, and unless we have his OK, we can't do anything. Since the chief is not here right now, would it be alright if I talked to him right after he comes back? I'll ask him right away if we can take on your case, and I'll contact you."

The man gave a shallow nod, apparently satisfied with his hastily-composed excuse. Oe was relieved. He offered Kitagawa the clipboard he had been taking notes with, along with his pen.

"Anywhere there's space, could you write down your address and name, and your cell phone number?"

The man's writing was not exactly sloppy, but it was rather angular. His address read, "Maple On-site Dorm, Kitajima Steel Factory". Here was a factory who had hired Kitagawa while aware of his criminal record. The man lived in an on-site dorm. *Definitely not making big bucks*, Oe conjectured.

He looked down at the clipboard that was returned to him, and questioned the man. Something important was missing.

"Could you tell me your cell phone number? I think you forgot to write it down."

"I don't have one."

It was unusual for a young man like him not to have one.

"Do you have some sort of common telephone at your dorm, then?"

"Yeah, but someone broke it last month and it's been like that since. Everyone has cell phones already, so people barely used it. That's probably why they don't feel like fixing it, either."

"Isn't that inconvenient for you? What about when you need to contact your family urgently?"

"I don't have any family."

For a moment, Oe's words stuck in his throat.

"I have a mother," the man continued, "but the last time I saw her was the one time before I got arrested. I probably have a father too, but I've never even heard about him."

Didn't mothers usually come to see their sons at least once, even though they were in prison? Was she so fed up with her son's crime, or had she fled because she wanted nothing to do with it?

"Is there a telephone at your workplace that I can get hold of you through?"

"The company phone is for business. The president won't like it if I get a call during work hours. But if it's after work... oh, then the office would be closed." The man folded his arms and knitted his brow, appearing to be deep in thought.

"I'll come here tomorrow," he said finally. "Work ends past eight in the evening, so I can get here at eight thirty."

Oe had been investigating an extramarital affair in the evenings since last week. If his target wrapped up at work by seven and went home straight without stopping along the way, it would take him about twenty minutes by train and fifteen minutes by foot from his office to his home. Oe figured he could still come back to the office after finishing the investigation. But if the target made contact with his illicit lover, Oe would have no way of knowing when he could get back.

In that case, however, Oe concluded that he could always tell the chief about his situation and have him deal with Kitagawa instead.

"Alright," Oe agreed. "Then I'll see you tomorrow at eight-thirty at this office."

Once their discussion was over, the man strode swiftly out. He was just as impatient leaving as he was coming in. Oe drew up to the window and looked down at the sidewalk below. The dirty umbrella was easily spotted even from a distance as it grew smaller amidst the rain. The man seemed pushy, and it would probably be a hassle if he argued with the same stubbornness tomorrow. A heavy sigh escaped naturally from Oe's lips.

What crime had that man, Kitagawa, been imprisoned for? He had been released four years ago, which meant he had been thirty. If he had been granted a release at that age, he could not have committed a crime that serious. *Theft, fraud, assault, drugs—no, probably not drugs.* Oe's liberal assumption came from the man's classic look.

He doesn't seem like a bad man, but he was raised by a single parent. His mother doesn't seem too affectionate, either. He looks like the straight-laced type, but maybe he had something in him that made him turn to crime, Oe thought casually, as if were none of his own affair.

It was past eight when Oe arrived home at his two-bedroom apartment. There was no phone call asking for backup from Katori, who was out tailing someone since the afternoon. Things appeared to be going well. Oe could have gone home earlier if he wanted, but he had gotten engrossed in a conversation with the chief.

When he explained his opinion to the chief, that the case for man with a criminal record who came in the afternoon would probably not end in a successful search, the chief agreed.

"It's probably best if we turn him down," he had said. When Oe told him that the man did not have a phone, and that he would come to the office the next evening to hear what he had to say, the chief reassured him that he would decline on Oe's behalf if he was out investigating.

The rain had started in the afternoon, but continued well into the night, getting lighter and

heavier but showing no signs of letting up. If tomorrow's weather was like this too, Oe would have trouble tailing. The target would be easy to spot since he had an umbrella, but he could just as easily be spotted himself since he would be carrying his own. It was hard to keep the right amount of tailing distance.

Oe walked down the narrow hall while he loosened the knot of his tie. There was no dress code at work, but in the detective field, trustworthiness was paramount. Suits usually boded well for everyone, and they made their clients feel comfortable. In addition, detectives in principle had to go unnoticed because of the kind of work they did, such as tailing and stakeouts. Apart from theme parks, perhaps, the clothing that best blended in with daily scenery and was natural to see on a man of his age was a suit. More than anything, suits were the chief's idea of "looking good". However, Katori on the other hand never wore suits unless he had to. Opinions on aesthetics were scattered at this office.

Oe went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He failed to spot anything he could eat right away, so he took a cup of instant noodles out of the cupboard and put on some water to boil. Oe always finished work at irregular hours, so as soon as his wife realized that any dinner left for him would only spoil, she stopped setting his portion aside.

Unable to wait for the three minutes it took to cook, Oe sat at the living room table across from the kitchen and began to slurp on his undercooked noodles. He had just started when he heard hasty footsteps in the hallway. His wife was peeking in from the entrance to the room.

"You're home early." She sat down across from Oe. Sometimes when she had a bad day, she would ignore Oe altogether when he came home, but today she seemed to be in a good mood. Oe's wife was two years younger than him and beautiful in her own way when they married, but none of that beauty was apparent now. Her cheeks sagged and the wrinkles were etched into her face. Her body was shapeless. Oe did not even feel the desire to undress her anymore. She was becoming less and less of a woman to him. Oe figured that perhaps was no longer a man to her as well, for the same kind of reason.

Oe's wife propped up her elbows on the table and rested her cheek on her hand, watching Oe's face intently. However, when he turned away, she let out a long, long sigh.

"I talked to Miharu, and she still says she won't be able to make it into a national university." Their daughter, Miharu, was in her third and last year of high school. Next year, she was set to apply for university. She had said she wanted to enter the Arts department of a national university in the neighbourhood.

"You know she's bad at maths and sciences. She says she won't be able to pass the national exams."¹

Oe furrowed his brow. In his opinion, they were already straining themselves considerably to pay for her to attend a national university. A private university would only increase that burden.

"We won't be able to manage a private university with your salary, right?" his wife said. "I know. Even if I were to work part-time, it wouldn't add much."

It seemed his wife had internalized the fact as well.

"Can you seriously consider what we talked about last time?" his wife glanced up at him.

"What's that again?" Oe bluffed. His wife clenched both hands and banged them on the table.

"What I said about you helping out with my father's construction company!"

"I've already said no. I have a career I want to follow."

1 National Center Test for University Admissions, or the "Center test" is a nation-wide exam conducted for students applying for national universities, and includes a range of subjects.

His wife pouted.

"I'm not saying your detective work is bad," she said. "But your salary hasn't gone up in the past five years, has it? Some years you're lucky enough to get a bonus, but some years you don't get any. To tell you the truth, your salary is barely enough to sustain the three of us. For someone the same age as you working at a regular company, it would be normal to make at least three hundred... no, four hundred thousand a month... even more."

Her voice was as sharp as needles. When Oe gave no answer, she grabbed his arm and shook it.

"Hey!" she insisted.

"Convince Miharuru that she's going to a national university or nothing."

Suddenly, his wife's expression changed. "It's not fair that she has to give up on higher learning because we can't afford it. The poor girl!" Her shrill, agitated voice was irritating to the ears.

"I'm not saying she has to give up. I can still pay for her to go to a national university."

"I'll make Miharuru work harder, of course, but aren't you willing even to bend a little?"

Oe averted his eyes from his wife and her tirade. "You can eat enough not to starve and you have enough to wear to keep you warm. Don't be greedy."

Hah. He heard an irritating laugh.

"What are you saying?" his wife said derisively. "That's not enough, which is why everyone's working. If we only needed food and clothes, we'd be no better than the homeless. Stop giving me nonsense and give it some serious thought. My father's already told me that he's willing to give you more than your current salary if you have any desire to transfer to his company."

Oe was at once embarrassed and intensely angered that his wife had been snitching to his father-in-law about how her husband's salary was too low. It was true that detective work could hardly be called high-paying, but he had worked diligently at his job. He had handed over all of his earnings to his wife, himself enduring an allowance of only ten thousand yen² a month.

"It must be so hassle-free, living life just looking downwards at all the people who have less than us," his wife said scathingly. "Well, reality isn't like that. Consider what I said before, do you hear?" she spat before leaving the living room. Oe no longer felt like eating the rest of his cup noodles. His wife's loud outburst at his ear had taken away his appetite altogether.

His daughter was still dear to him, no matter how underachieving she was, and he more than wanted to let her go to the university of her choosing. But realistically, he did not have the money. In addition to that, Oe was also not convinced that Miharuru wanted to go to university that badly in the first place. If she really was serious, would she not have stayed home studying diligently during summer vacation instead of "taking a breather" and going away on a trip?

Oe had told his wife that he had a career wanted to follow, but he was actually not so attached to detective work. The majority of the cases that came into his office were investigations to do with love affairs. Dealing with these cases every day made him distrustful of people. There was no emotion more ugly than hatred and jealousy. Every time he encountered angry yelling, crying, and confrontations, he was overcome with futility. But he got used to it; it was shocking to see a river of sewage in a place one had never been to before, but one's eyes eventually glossed over it once it became a daily fixture. This was the same thing.

Oe's hesitation towards changing careers came from uncertainty more than his attachment to his job. After living so freely, he did not know if he could handle a regular company job. He knew nothing about the construction industry, and he had no experience in clerical work. Could he

2 About 100 USD.

go from spending the majority of the day out and about to being chained to his desk? He figured his wife would not understand what it meant to find out he was not cut out for a job, or to be labelled as incompetent, at this age.

The woman's eyes only saw the numbers on his salary slip. If he talked to her, then, would she understand? Would she say, "I guess it can't be helped" and back down? Oe laughed to himself. He had a feeling about how this would end.

"You don't know until you try," his wife would insist, and she would cease to think any further.

The next day, the man that Oe had been tailing finished work at ten minutes to seven and headed home without stopping anywhere along the way. Oe's job was over the minute the man stepped into his house. The time was half past seven. It was approximately twenty minutes from the man's house to Oe's office. He could make it for his eight-thirty appointment without rushing.

In truth, Oe was less than eager to see the persistent man again, but he felt guilty pushing the burden onto his chief. Oe steeled himself and strode purposefully down the narrow path through the residential neighbourhood.

He was not in a rush by all means, but a sheen of sweat began to form on his forehead. The ground had still not dried from the rain, which had not let up until late last evening, and the humid air stuck to his skin. It felt like the rainy season was here already. When Oe boarded the train, he was momentarily released from the humidity by the cool air in the air-conditioned car.

Three high-school girls wearing the uniform of his daughter's school were standing near the doors. Oe's heart contracted for a moment, but Miharu was not among them.

The words "university admissions" rose in the back of his mind. Frankly, if Miharu had no particular desire to pursue further learning, Oe much preferred that she find a job and start working instead. It made things a lot easier. Further learning would be pointless without a goal. University was not a moratorium until working life came along. It would be much more beneficial to work and begin to learn about society instead of fooling around in the name of studying.

If Oe were to talk to his wife about his daughter's finding employment, he was sure she would be outraged and insist that it was a cruel thing to do. To his wife, the daughter was not to blame for doing badly in school; the husband was to blame for not making enough money. Oe himself did not want to prevent their daughter from going to post-secondary. The problem was that it cost too much. If he had the money, he would not mind sending his daughter to university, even though he was fully aware that she would slack off instead of study.

If only he had the money. Oe stared up at the white ceiling of the train. If he had the money, he would not have to quit being a detective to find other work. His wife would stop complaining about being poor, and his daughter would get the university student status she'd been wanting to have.

"It's all about money in the end," he muttered quietly.

When Oe got off at the station nearest to his office along with the three high school girls, the momentary cool relief vanished as he was closed in from all sides by the humid air again. A shortcut to his office was to walk along the riverside and cut through the park. Oe strode down the dark path along the river, which was dotted sparsely with street lamps. Once he entered the park, which consisted of a sandbox, a wooden bench, and two small swings, the number of street lamps increased for the purpose of crime prevention. The extra street lamps lit the place considerably better.

Oe saw a figure sitting on the bench. His face was indiscernible, for it was thrown in

shadow, but the man appeared young. He was sitting with his head hung low. Oe passed the man quickly. God knew what could set people off nowadays. These days in this society, you could get stabbed just for making eye contact with someone.

"Oe," a voice called just as Oe passed by. He stopped and turned around. As the man stood up slowly in the dark, a street lamp illuminated his mouth. The man's awkwardly-parted lips moved.

"Mr. Oe."

The man came nearer, casting a long shadow behind him.

"I was going to head over to your office in a bit."

Kitagawa stood before him, in the same short-sleeve shirt and black pants. He had materialized without even a chance for Oe to mentally prepare himself.

"What are you doing here?" Oe cast a glance at his surroundings. There was nothing to be found in the park at nightfall but dim lights and dolefulness.

"I was killing time. I thought it'd be a nuisance for you if I went too early."

Oe had initially thought the man was impatient, but apparently he possessed some courtesy as well. Now Oe did not even have to take him to the office; he only had to turn the man down right here. But when Oe thought of how Kitagawa might not take no for an answer, and instead continue to argue with him, he suddenly felt dismal. Then again, he could not simply put off things he did not want to do.

"This is a good chance for us to talk. Why don't we chat right here?" Oe suggested. This conversation was not casual enough to have standing up, but he felt like if they sat down, it would only lengthen their stay.

"About what you asked yesterday," he continued, "I've talked to the chief, and in the end we've reached the conclusion that we can't take your case. The basis of our decision is that the information we have on hand is so little that a search would be difficult."

The man took a step forward and clenched Oe's right arm.

"I don't care how much time or money it'll take. I want you to find him."

The man's face was drawing closer to his. Kitagawa was younger, taller, and stronger—at least in appearance—than him. The necessities of Oe's occupation had made him learn his fair share of self-defence and martial arts, but he had never used any of it in real life. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

"B-But you see, as I told you before, investigative fees are not exactly cheap."

"I told you I would pay!" The man's voice rose and his tone turned stormy. Oe wanted to run away with his tail between his legs.

"If we don't find him in the end, you still won't get any of those fees back."

"It doesn't matter." The fingers around his arm clenched harder until it became painful.

"Please, my arm—" Oe implored. Much to his surprise, the man's fingers instantly unclenched and drew away.

"Oh, sorry about that."

At one point Oe had feared what would become of himself, but when he observed the man to be the type to keep his cool, he was reassured for the time being. The man stood with his arms close at his sides and his head bowed, like a scolded child.

"I've asked a lot of other detectives in the past, but none of them were able to find Douno. Every time, they told me I didn't have enough information. I know it's not going to be an easy search."

The man lifted his face. His unsteady gaze put Oe under the illusion that he was this man's last hope.

"But how am I ever going to find him if I don't keep looking?" Kitagawa's tone was desperate. Oe began to pity the man as he watched him slumped and standing forlorn.

"Let's sit down for a bit, shall we?" Oe ushered Kitagawa onto a bench. He sat down beside the man. Kitagawa, looking completely extinguished, slouched forward and cradled his head in his hands.

"Is he someone you want to see that badly?" Oe asked.

"Yes," came the man's muffled reply.

If Kitagawa had turned up no results at the other detective agencies, it was clear that there was a definite lack of information. His own office, Nishiyama Detective Agency, was not exactly large, either. He was limited, to say the least, in the things he could do and the results he could show for it. Turning Kitagawa down was for his own good as well as out of Oe's consideration for him.

"Don't think that I don't understand how you feel, Mr. Kitagawa. But the reality is that this is going to be an incredibly difficult search. It'll be like sifting through all the sand on a beach to find one grain of rice. Instead of wasting your money on something like this, why not buy the things you want, take a trip or two, enjoy yourself?"

The man fell silent. A brittle scraping as he raked his nails through his short hair.

"I didn't mind living in prison," he began suddenly without warning. "I got three meals a day, and I could bathe. I had my own futon. I had a place to belong there."

"You may have been cared for, but there's no freedom in prison."

The man nodded his short-haired head.

"After Douno was released, it took me almost a year until I was let out. I was angry at how long it felt for a day, an hour, a minute to pass. I finally understood that that was what it meant to have no freedom."

The man looked up.

"It's been four years since I left that place. I'm free now, and my body can take me wherever I want to go—but I can't see Douno. I've been looking for him all this time, and still I can't find him."

If this man had been searching ever since getting out of prison, he was quite tenacious.

"So this Mr. Douno must have been very good to you while you were in prison."

The man twitched a corner of his mouth up in a sneer.

"I'm the one that was good to him. He seemed smart, but he was weak, and didn't know anything, and had no idea how to go about things. That's why I shared my cold medicine and tissues with him."

I thought he wanted to see Douno again because he respected him, Oe thought in perplexity, but continued the conversation anyway.

"Then I guess Mr. Douno is the one who has to thank you when you meet," he remarked.

"Thank me? Oh. I don't really care about that. I just want to see him. I want to see him, talk to him, and then..."

Oe doubted his ears when he heard the man's next words.

"Do you think I'd be able to live with him?"

"I, er, don't think that would be possible."

"Why not?" the man tilted his head.

"It's been six years since his release. I think he might have a life of his own now. If he had a lover then, they may be married now. Even if Mr. Douno was still single, it'd be unnatural for two men to live together, unless there was some special financial circumstance."

"Are you saying I'm not normal?"

Oe swallowed his words at the man's frankness. It went without asking: Kitagawa's thought patterns were not defined by common sense, but Oe was reluctant to say so out loud.

"I'm just saying it's not very common. Of course, there may be people out there who do," he conceded vaguely. Kitagawa drew his eyebrows together and tilted his head slightly.

"Aren't there a lot of homos out there in the world, and not just in prison? Don't *they* live together? Or does one go over to the other guy's house every day?"

Oe's eyes bulged. He knew he was extremely unsettled, but he nevertheless made an effort to look unperturbed so that the other man would not notice. *I heard "acquaintance", not "male lover". Oh, but he did say that he wanted to see him because he was "someone I like".* He had found it strange, but had convinced himself that it was a sort of affection between an apprentice and master. He had not expected it to be a romantic attachment.

Oe looked the man over. His stoic demeanour gave away not a speck of femininity. Did that mean the other man played the woman's part? But didn't the other man have a fiancée? He had a female fiancée, and yet was involved in a romantic relationship with Kitagawa—Oe began to spiral into confusion.

A man with a fiancée committed a crime and was put into prison, where he met Kitagawa in the same cell and became romantically involved with him. The man finished his term and was released first. Kitagawa, who was released later, was searching for the man who used to be his lover. Oe got the basic picture.

What he did not understand was this other man, Douno. He had a female fiancée, yet he had relations with a man inside prison. He was quite an unfaithful character. *Let's say... for the sake of argument, that Douno was actually in love with Kitagawa. If he was serious, wouldn't he have come to pick Kitagawa up when he was released?*

"Didn't Mr. Douno know when you were being released, Mr. Kitagawa?"

The man pursed his lips grumpily.

"I told him. Maybe he forgot."

"Do you think he'd forget the day his lover would be set free?"

Oe's question was right to the point. A lover who didn't come to see him released—perhaps Kitagawa did not want to face the inevitable truth that the fact implied.

"Maybe Douno doesn't want to see me."

Oh, so he knows, Oe thought, but Kitagawa did not appear affected as he stared blankly at the swings in the far side of the park.

"But I want to see him."

Foolish, Oe thought. If the fact the they were two men did not make things difficult enough, they did not even have mutual feelings for each other. It was absolutely pointless. What could amount from spending money on a search? Even if the man was found and they were able to meet each other again, Kitagawa would only be shunned. But the man was aware of that, too.

"Was Mr. Douno such a great person?"

After a long silence, Kitagawa answered, "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Douno talked to me about a lot of things. I didn't even understand half of the things he said, but I felt happy listening to him."

"Happy?"

"Isn't that what they call love?"

Oe failed to understand what Kitagawa was trying to get at. Was he saying they talked, got along, and therefore it was love? No—if Kitagawa said it had made him happy, perhaps Douno had said something that made Kitagawa feel that way.

"You know, it actually isn't that difficult to say the kind of things that make people happy. Basically, you just have to compliment them. No one gets offended by compliments."

"Douno wasn't complimenting me."

"He doesn't have to do it directly. There are ways to stroke someone's ego covertly."

Kitagawa knitted his brow.

"It might have been that, it might not have. I don't remember anymore."

Just when he seemed stubborn, he would easily waver. Perhaps this man was the type to get tricked easily, and hence why he had been manipulated by Douno.

But Kitagawa was aware of it. It was not like he did not understand that he was no longer wanted. Yet, he still clung to the feelings of his past—it was a typical pattern of a bad relationship.

He should just quit searching. Instead of investing money in emotions that will never be requited, he should use it for other things. It was a waste of money, first and foremost. There were hoards of people out there who were scrambling for cash.

Oe gave a short sigh. He was one of those scrambling people. He was an unhappy man, forced into a career change by his wife because he didn't make enough money. He did not think money was everything, but there were certainly things that money could solve.

"We won't be able to take your case, Mr. Kitagawa. What will you do next?"

"I'll ask another detective."

"Even if you ask another agency, I don't think they'll find him."

"That's fine. It gives me peace of mind to have someone out there searching."

Kitagawa would most likely act upon his word and commission another detective agency. Only malevolent agencies agreed to cases which were hopeless from the start, with the sole purpose of raking in investigative fees. Such companies certainly did exist in this industry. Considerate agencies turned down requests; untrustworthy agencies were the ones who always confidently declared that their search would be a success. This man, unknowing of this fact, would probably end up surrendering his money to these scams, where it would simply be swallowed up into the dark.

The base fee for searching the whereabouts of a person, depending on the content, was about 40,000 yen a week, give or take. If Oe had to take trips out of town, he could claim those expenses separately. He could make about 160,000 to 200,000 in a month. If he continued that for three months, it would add up to somewhat of a small bonus.

It was a reckless plan—Oe internally laughed off the idea which had sprung without warning into his head. It was not so easy to trick someone. Swindlers were careful and minute with their plans. Even if the target was easy to trick, a plan developed on-the-fly was not bound to go over well.

Kitagawa worked at a steel factory, but Oe had a feeling that his job did not require specialized knowledge. He guessed Kitagawa's highest education level was high school, or vocational school at best. He was probably not well-versed in law, and seeing that he had a criminal record, he was probably reluctant to go to the police for advice about anything, for he would probably want to avoid being involved with them. To add to that, the man did not have a cell phone, and had no access to his company phone. His only method of contact was to meet people directly. Oe's heart raced. Every fragment he pieced together of the man seemed to lead in a favourable direction for him.

Maybe it would work. No—he was positive it would. But no matter how much this man was willing to throw his money down the drain, it was still a crime to trick him out of it. —But was it really? Kitagawa was satisfied with the situation of "having someone out searching". His peace of mind came not from the contents of the search, but the act of searching itself. Oe would pretend

to search to give Kitagawa peace of mind. He would receive money in return. Supply and demand matched perfectly. It would be under the pretence of a lie, yes, but both sides would attain satisfaction nonetheless.

But still—Oe struggled with his conflicting feelings. Even if this made all sides happy, if he was discovered, he would be arrested. Perhaps he could manage if he made a proper report. He was not being taped on surveillance, after all. If he flipped one page of a phone book each day, it could still pass as an investigation.

Could he try it out? If Kitagawa became suspicious, all he had to do was terminate the investigation. Oe clenched his hands into tight fists.

“—You want us to take the case, no matter what, am I right?” Even talking normally seemed to make his throat unnaturally dry. The man gave a shallow nod.

“We’ve concluded that the office cannot handle your case. But it seems to me that you have your own issues. What I can do is personally take on your case instead.”

“Personally?”

Despite his attempt at a cool outward appearance, Oe’s heart was hammering like an alarm bell.

“Which means we’ll do this without going through my office. I’ll investigate on my own whenever I have time, and hand over the results to you.”

“I don’t mind what it is, as long as you’ll search for him.”

It was precisely the ideal answer he was looking for.

“Then let us do this: I’ll do everything within my power to search for Mr. Douno. But since I’m prohibited by my agency from taking personal cases, I would like you to keep this a business just between the two of us, which means I would appreciate if you didn’t contact the office at all about this. If my agency finds out, I’ll receive due punishment, and that will be the end of the investigation for you. ...Is that alright?”

Oe emphasized “end of the investigation” to eliminate the chances of Kitagawa contacting the agency.

“Got it,” the man said with a solemn nod.

“I also have agency work to do, so I won’t be able to devote all of my time to your case, Mr. Kitagawa. So I will report to you once every half-month. As for investigative fees, since I have no support from my agency on this, if I have to end up tailing someone by taxi I may not be able to cover the fees myself. So with that in mind, would you be able to pay me part of the investigative fee immediately, as down payment? Of course, I will return whatever I don’t use to you, and if I happen to spend over that amount, I will charge you separately.”

Despite his internal turmoil, Oe’s lips moved nimbly to recite an explanation he had gotten used to giving.

“How much would it cost?”

“Let’s see... a week’s worth of investigation is 40,000 yen, so a half-month’s worth is about 100,000 yen to start with. Would you be able to pay that much?”

The man dug into his pocket and pulled out some bare bills. They were ordinary 10,000 yen bills, yet the sight of them made Oe tense enough to feel his pulse in his fingertips. Kitagawa counted the crumpled bills and clicked his tongue irritably.

“I only have 83,000.”

“That’s fine. I can collect the rest the next time we meet.”

Kitagawa furrowed his brow despite the fact that Oe had reassured him he could pay next time. Oe panicked and wondered if his shoddy charade had been exposed. He gradually began to feel sick to the stomach.

Kitagawa stood up suddenly, the difficult expression still on his face.

"I have money back at my dorm. Wait here for a minute while I bring it. I'll be back in about twenty minutes."

"There's no rush."

Kitagawa shook his head, his expression still stiff.

"It's important to start on the right foot for these things, isn't it? Wouldn't you be more encouraged to work for a customer who pays the whole amount completely, instead of a customer who doesn't pay right from the start?"

Oe panicked. Was it this easy to make money? Didn't this man feel any shred of doubt towards him at all? Perhaps he was only making an excuse to go back to his dorm, to call out and bring his brawny friends to beat Oe into a pulp for tricking him.

"Really, I don't mind if you bring it next time. I trust you, Mr. Kitagawa, and I have no intentions of doing a substandard investigation just because of a late payment."

For the moment, I just want to go home with as much money as I can get. That was Oe's honest state of mind.

"Oh," Oe added, "if you happen to have the reports from your previous detective agencies, would you be able to lend them to me next time we meet, so I can use them as reference? I would only be wasting my time if I did the same things that other agencies did. I would like to take a different approach."

The brusque man appeared to smile.

"No, actually, I'll get those now. Wait for me."

The man left at a run, ignoring Oe's protests. Oe was left alone in the park. After the man disappeared out of sight, Oe stood up and sat down repeatedly. His guilt at tricking someone, mixed with a strange excitement, made him jittery.

As a detective, it was common for him to lie, or to investigate under a false identity, but those were in the name of the investigation, and were not for his own purposes.

For an instant, he considered going home while Kitagawa was away. Then, he would not have to dirty his hands with such a despicable deed. But if Kitagawa came back to find him really gone, what would he do? Would he chase him back to the agency? Would he make a scene at the office with vengeance, claiming Oe had taken his case on personally? That would be trouble. Big trouble, indeed.

Was Oe locked in from escape, then, because he had put his promise into words about taking Kitagawa's case upon himself? No. He could still cancel or continue this plan as he needed.

Oe's superficial guilt was completely erased the moment he saw Kitagawa appear carrying a paper bag in his arms. The expression on the man's face as he handed the papers over to Oe was like that of a child showing off his treasures.

"This is all of it," Kitagawa wheezed, having returned three minutes earlier than his predicted twenty minutes. Oe peered into the paper bag and was shocked. There were more reports than he had expected.

"You're really proper," Kitagawa said.

Oe looked up.

"None of them ever asked me to bring reports from other detectives."

Oe sometimes asked for other companies' results, but he never asked for the actual reports. Depending on the detective agency, the quality of reports ranged from superb to useless, and there was no guarantee that the reports were absolutely correct. Oe had requested materials this time only, because he still had to write a report even if he did no investigation. He had felt like he would be able to summarize materials from other companies to come up with something presentable.

"I found this while I was getting the reports together." Kitagawa offered Oe a piece of paper folded into four. Oe unfolded it and was astonished at what he saw. On the scrap of paper was an incredibly detailed drawing of a man's face, done in pencil, like the sketches that the police used for their investigations.

"What's this?"

"I drew it from my memories of Douno."

The man on the piece of paper had no notable traits apart from his shaved head, and was as average as average Joes came. The man's facial features aside, Oe was more impressed at how good the drawing was. Oe himself had been part of the visual arts club when he was a student. He stopped drawing after he graduated, but to this day he still took outings to the art gallery when it held exhibitions of his favourite artists.

"You're very good at drawing, Mr. Kitagawa. Have you taken lessons somewhere?"

"Will that help in your search?" was Kitagawa's non-answer.

"I think it will. I'll hold onto this, if you don't mind. Say, Mr. Kitagawa, did you learn drawing somewhere?" he asked again out of curiosity.

"When I still went to school, I hated arts and crafts. I didn't start drawing until I got into prison. It was because Douno told me I was good."

"You haven't taken any formal drawing classes, then."

Kitagawa shook his head.

"It's not too late to start. Why not start pursuing drawing seriously?"

Kitagawa shook his head again.

"I can't. I can only draw what I see. Drawing is something you do with the heart, isn't it?"

Oe was stuck for an answer at the man's direct gaze.

"It said so in one of the books they lent out in prison," Kitagawa continued. "It said to draw with your heart, no matter how sloppy it is. My drawings only imitate real life. Experts can tell these things right off the bat, right?"

Perhaps it was the truth. But it was superficial advice. It was superficial, but it was also the truth. The more Oe thought about it, the more confused he became, and in the end he could say nothing.

Mounds of reports, the sketch, and a hundred thousand yen—after collecting those items, Oe promised Kitagawa to meet here again at the same time, half a month down the road. Kitagawa left in a good mood, not knowing that he had just been victim to a fraud.

Oe, who had remained at the park, called the office on his cell phone. "I met the client in question at the park," he told them. "I turned down his case on the spot. I'm heading straight home from here."

Oe took the paper bag he had received from Kitagawa home to his own apartment. If it was found in the office by the chief or by Katori, he would not be able to account for it. He took a cheap dinner at a beef-bowl franchise for under 500 yen, and got home past ten o'clock. Only the light in the doorway was on, and it appeared his wife and daughter were already asleep.

Oe went to the kitchen and took out a beer from the fridge. He took a swig, then began to lay out the investigation reports from Kitagawa on the dining table. There were about twenty reports, and he sorted them out by year.

The oldest was from four years ago. In a year, Kitagawa had commissioned three to four detective agencies for two to three months each. He supposed price-friendly agencies would charge about 400,000 yen per case at the cheapest. Continue that for four years, and it added up to

6 million yen. Going by this calculation, it meant this man had already spent this ridiculous sum of money solely for the purpose of finding one man. Oe unwittingly sighed—out of exasperation.

Oe perused the reports in order from the oldest. He could sense from the writing the kind of difficulty each agency went through because of the lack of information.

Some agencies had searched for prisoners who lived in the same cell as Kitagawa and Douno. They had probably figured they could find out about Douno from other cellmates, but it was difficult to find cellmates based on just their names. They had found one man called Kakizaki, however—“Re-arrested and currently serving in prison. Unable to secure an interview,” said the report, and that was the disappointing end of that thread.

As he read on, Oe learned that Douno had been imprisoned for indecent assault. Since it was a light offence, he had come into prison after Kitagawa but been released before him in less than a year. With Douno’s criminal history as a reference point, some agencies had accessed sites for “train groping” enthusiasts to collect information, but none had reaped anything of use.

Some agencies conducted proper investigations by computer and footwork to base their reports on, while another chose the unbelievably inefficient method of calling every Douno in the phone book, adding a separate charge for the phone bill. Some reports were clearly from scam agencies. “We were unable to find the target of investigation,” the report said, without even giving details on what kind of investigation was conducted.

It was one o’clock in the morning by the time Oe finished browsing through all of the reports. All of the other agencies had covered the methods he had thought about using himself, and some had approached the search from a standpoint he would never have thought of. If Douno had still not been found after all of this, he was never going to be found. It was impossible, no matter how you looked at it.

Oe put the materials back in the paper bag, and drained the rest of his beer. In his head, he drew up a scenario for the next time they would meet. In one of the reports from two years ago, the agency had called all of the city halls in the four prefectures of the Kanto region, asking if a man called Douno had ever worked there. Oe could take that and arrange it a little, saying he had broadened the search by calling the Chuubu region, but had yielded no results. Next came the Kansai region. This method was unlikely to draw suspicion, too, since it expanded on an investigation that a previous agency had done.

Oe fished out his wallet from his pocket. He peered inside. The bills amounted to exactly 100,000 yen. It was ten months’ worth of his allowance. Tomorrow, he would deposit this into a bank account he had made without his wife’s knowledge. If he continued this for two months, it would add up to 400,000 yen. If Kitagawa was still not suspicious of him, he would continue for another month. That would make 600,000 yen. It would amount to a small bonus.

Oe leaned against his chair-back and stretched backwards. The chair legs creaked dully. The man with the white shirt and black pants flitted across his mind.

He was terse, but not a bad man. Even with a criminal history, he still had the wits to restrain his emotions.

“Homosexual, huh,” Oe muttered to himself. He was not well-versed in non-heterosexual society, but he at least sort of knew the difference between transvestites and gays. Kitagawa was probably the gay type, the kind of person who didn’t have to change his body to love other men.

Sex with another man—just the thought of it made Oe feel sick. He knew had no say in others’ preferences, and if some people were like that, he had no choice but to accept it. Nevertheless, it was not a good feeling.

When it came to romance, their feelings were probably no less different than those between a man and woman, but he could not help but think it futile. They couldn’t marry, nor have

children, obviously. On top of that, Japan was not an accepting place for gay people.

Futile, futile, Oe repeated in his head, until he reached one conclusion: perhaps Kitagawa was the type to feel romance in misfortune. A futile relationship, a futile love, a futile search. Oe was merely a chess piece to satisfy the man's romanticism for the futile.

If that was the case, he would investigate and use up the man's money, just as Kitagawa wished. It was his goal to be futile, so the content of his investigation and the money didn't matter. What was important was the miserable fact that he was spending so much money on the search.

Rattle, rattle. The kitchen window facing the passageway outside made a sound, startling Oe out of his seat. It was not very loud—perhaps it was just the wind. His palpitating heart, however, took a while to calm down afterwards.

No matter what kind of logical reason he attached to it, Oe was still tricking a misdirected homosexual ex-con while knowing the man was at a disadvantage.

But as the past investigation reports proved, Oe was not the only one to take advantage of this man.

"It's his own fault for getting tricked."

Oe wished he could have another beer.

Once past mid-October, the wind rustling through the falling leaves began to carry a sad note. No amount of strong sunlight was enough to cut the chill of the wind now, and the weather made one want an extra sweater to wear over one's shirt. Since Oe spent a lot of his time out, he could physically feel the changing seasons. Slowly but surely, they were approaching winter.

Oe arrived at their meeting place in the park about ten minutes past eight-thirty. Kitagawa was sitting on the bench in a white shirt and black pants, so unchanged that it made Oe feel like he was having *deja vu*. The only thing that had changed was the temperature.

When they had first met, Oe thought Kitagawa was purposely going for the classic look, but his outfit this time made Oe sure that he was not. Kitagawa obviously had nothing to wear other than this white shirt and black pants.

As Oe approached and got a closer view of the man, he instantly noticed how much the man's face had changed. Kitagawa had a sturdy build to begin with, though he was not fat. In the half-month that Oe had not seen him, Kitagawa's cheeks had become more drawn, and his face more tan.

"Good evening," Oe said.

"How's it coming along?" Kitagawa asked immediately.

Oe smiled wryly. "I read through all the reports you gave me, and I've expanded the search to go a little further out than the suburbs of Kanto, which was the original range. Mr. Douno doesn't work for city hall anymore, but if there's anyone left at his workplace whom he used to be friendly with, they might know his contact information."

Oe faithfully recited the scenario he had built inside his head. Kitagawa's face, glowing with expectation, quickly turned crestfallen.

Oe had originally been planning to repeat the same tactic, but he wondered if he should give Kitagawa hope by lying about a lead if he had to. If Oe came back with failure after failure, it would only discourage Kitagawa. Dissatisfaction bred suspicion. Oe wanted to avoid suspicion at all costs.

"We've only just begun the search. They say a journey of a thousand *ri* begins from one step. If we keep focused on city hall, we're bound to find a trail that leads to Mr. Douno."

He put forth encouraging words. Kitagawa, who had begun to hang his head, lifted his face

and murmured, "Yeah, I guess." Then, he continued to stare at Oe, looking like he wanted to say something. Oe swallowed nervously at his gaze.

"—What's *ri*?"

Oe blinked rapidly at the unexpected question.

"I'm not very smart," Kitagawa said. "What's *ri*? Some kind of drug?"

"Um, well, a thousand *ri* is... a measurement that was used a long, long time ago, and it's about—I wonder how long it is in our measurements? Well, anyway, it's a really long distance. So it's a proverb that means that any kind of journey to a faraway place starts with the step right at your feet."

"Ah," the man murmured, as if impressed. 'A journey of a thousand *ri* starts from a single step' was a popular proverb that even primary school students would know. If this man did not know it, he either never read books, or was bad at Language Arts class in school, or was "not very smart" as he said, and had not studied much while in school.

Oe was terribly curious about Kitagawa's education, but he was reluctant to ask such a direct question. Kitagawa's education had nothing to do with the search, and it was possible that the man had a complex towards his lack of schooling.

"Mr. Kitagawa, whereabouts are you from?"

Kitagawa said he had lived outside the prefecture during elementary school, and had begun living in this area from middle school.

"And your high school?" From the outskirts, Oe directed the discussion to gradually narrow down on what he wanted to know.

"I never went," Kitagawa said. "I was in an orphanage, and most people started working after middle school."

Oe was suddenly overcome with awkwardness, along with guilt for his nosey curiosity.

"But I think I heard from you that you had a mother."

Kitagawa shrugged casually. "Doesn't do much to know she's alive if she's not around. It might've been better if I didn't have one at all. I always thought she'd come to pick me up one day. And when she did show up, all she did was ask to borrow money. And that time—" Kitagawa began to say something, then clipped his words. The street lamp illuminated half of his face, which carried a hint of sadness.

"How could I have known what was good and what was bad?" he said to himself.

Kitagawa had a mother, but she had abandoned him; once he started working, she was back to wheedle money out of him. Kitagawa was the very picture of misfortune. Luckily for Oe, his own parents had been nothing like this.

Kitagawa stuck a hand into his breast pocket and retrieved a rolled-up wad of crinkled 10,000-yen bills, held together with an elastic band. He thrust it out in front of Oe.

"Your next 100,000. That means you'll keep searching for another half-month, right?"

Oe accepted the bills from the man, counted them, and put them away in the inner pocket of his jacket. Kitagawa stood up from the bench, linked his hands high above his head, and did a big stretch.

"A journey of a thousand *ri* starts from one step huh..." Then, he turned back to Oe. "You remind me a little bit of Douno."

Oe was not exactly happy to be compared to an indecent assault convict who fooled around in bed with both sexes. However, if Oe reminded Kitagawa of someone he liked, it was an advantage for him. It would make Kitagawa less likely to see him in an unfavourable light.

"Is that so?" Oe replied with an affable smile that even he knew looked fake.

The day after receiving Kitagawa's money, Oe called a city hall outside the prefecture with a

story.

"My father is ill in the hospital, with barely days left to live," he told them. "He wants to see my little brother before he dies, but my brother's been missing. A man called Takafumi Douno was my brother's best friend, and I think he might know where my brother is. That's why I'm looking for Douno. I heard from my brother that Douno is working at city hall. Does he happen to work at yours?"

His story about his father and brother was a lie, of course. But people were more likely to feel sympathy and listen to his story if he talked about ill family members. Just as Oe expected, the person on the other line even took the trouble to flip through the registry, but no Takafumi Douno had ever worked there. This was also within Oe's predictions.

A single phone call was enough to make Oe sick and tired of the time he had to wait until he got an answer from the other end. He knew he could not complain—they were searching for his sake, after all—but he had been kept waiting like this for at least twenty minutes. He figured he should have hung up and asked them to call back, but was sucked in by the person on the line, who made it sound like he could pull up the information in an instant.

One phone investigation was over, and Oe was satisfied. He had no intention of making a second or third call. One call was enough to exempt him from any accusations of doing nothing at all.

Besides, phone calls to other prefectures cost money. Oe considered charging a couple of additional ten-thousands in the name of phone bills, but decided against it. He was already making Kitagawa pay 200,000 a month. The salary of a man living in a factory dorm, with a middle-school level education and a criminal record, could hardly be high. Perhaps the man had some additional savings, but if Oe charged too much, that would soon run dry, too.

Oe set his target search period to three months and 600,000 yen. Things were going well now, and he had a good feeling that he could extend this for one or two more months if Kitagawa didn't get suspicious.

Oe told his wife that he had negotiated with the chief and could expect a bonus this year. Suddenly, the griping woman turned quiet. They had not yet settled on what university their daughter was going to, but his wife seemed to give him at least some credit for negotiating. Oe did not think that a mere 600,000 yen would be enough to cover tuition and other costs of a private university, but for the present, he was out of imminent danger.

That day, Oe went out for drinks at an *izakaya*³ with his junior, Katori. Katori was in gloomy spirits because a disagreement with the client had led to the client fleeing without paying his entire fee. From the looks of it, it seemed the client had intended not to pay all along, and was not a case of the quality of Katori's investigation. The chief had considered taking it to court, but decided against it as they would end up paying more in legal expenses than what they had lost in the first place. Oe's innards boiled with anger as he realized that their giving up on court was probably also part of the client's plan.

Katori was apparently attempting to drown his sorrows in drink, for he drank quickly, and passed out before long. Oe delivered the drunkard to his apartment by taxi, then walked to the nearest station. The trains were still running, and his meagre salary did not allow him the luxury of taking a taxi home as well.

When he turned onto a main street, there were many people in school uniforms milling

3 A Japanese-style pub.

about, even though it was past eleven. Oe wondered why, then spotted a prominent cram school nearby. Some of the girls were wearing the uniform of his daughter's high school. He wondered if he would have to send Miharu to a cram school like this in order to get her into a national university, but it was too late now.

Oe had approached the last thirty-metre stretch to the station when he noticed the construction sign. Pedestrians had to take a detour through a narrow barricaded passage, which would make it a slightly longer walk. From the other side of the barricade, Oe could hear the intermittent dull rattling of sledgehammers, and foreign workers wearing yellow helmets were labouring away, sweating even in this chilly weather. Oe stopped in front of the detour and thumped his lower back. Katori's limp body had been heavier than he thought, and his back was suffering for it.

"Mister," he heard a voice call nearby. Oe tuned it out, figuring it was not for him.

"Mr. Detective."

Startled, Oe spun around. A tall man was standing on the other side of the yellow barricade. He was wearing a dirty T-shirt and light blue construction pants. He looked Japanese, but the yellow helmet hid half of his head, making his face hard to see.

"It's me. Don't you recognize me?"

He knew that voice. It was the sucker who brought him a hundred thousand yen every month.

"Mr. Kitagawa. You work here? What about the factory?"

The man pulled off the helmet covering half of his head. His thin face was blackened, from the dust, perhaps, and only the whites of his eyes glittered.

"This is a part-time job, because you guys cost a lot of money."

Kitagawa's day job was probably not enough to pay a hundred thousand a month. Oe tasted bitterness in the back of his mouth, and he remembered the guilt he had forgotten until now.

"Any luck finding Douno?"

Oe was stuck for words. When he remained silent, Kitagawa cocked his head.

"—We can't expect immediate results," Oe managed to utter. "Let's be patient."

"I guess," Kitagawa nodded slightly. "A journey of a thousand *ri* starts with a single step... was it? It must be tough for you guys, too, working so late."

Oe had only been drinking. It was probably even harsher for this man, working this night job after finishing his day job. It was already past eleven thirty. How much longer was he going to work for?

The weather out here felt chilly for Oe, but sweat was streaming down the other man's face. Kitagawa rubbed his face against the sleeve of his T-shirt, like a cat.

"You're sweating a lot," Oe commented.

"Oh, it just gets hot under the light," Kitagawa explained. "We can't see much at night, so they shine the lights full force."

A burly voice was calling Kitagawa from a darkened area further within the barricade.

"Please don't strain yourself," Oe told him. "And Mr. Kitagawa, can you make sure not to talk to me the next time you see me out in public?"

The man tilted his head curiously.

"Today I happened to be on the way home, but sometimes I tail people at night as well. If I'm stopped, or if someone calls me a detective, it might tip my target off and scare him away."

"Oh, I see. Right. I'll be careful next time."

The voice calling Kitagawa from behind rose angrily. It was practically a bellow.

"Noisy bastard," Kitagawa clicked his tongue irritably. "See ya, mister," he said, raising his

right hand. He disappeared into the intermittent clamour.

Oe swiftly left the premises. The guilt wreathed his heart like a haze, and remained there throughout the train ride and during the entire walk from the station to his house.

By the time Oe returned to his apartment, having completely worn off the alcoholic buzz in his body and brain, it was already one in the morning. He showered, changed into his pyjamas, and brushed his teeth. When he entered the hallway to go to his bedroom, he bumped into his daughter, who had a mug in hand. Perhaps she had gotten thirsty while studying.

"Good night," he said to her, but she replied with a plea, her head slightly cast down.

"Dad, I have a favour to ask you." Oe wondered if she was going to insist that she wanted to go to a private university, or something along those lines. He felt a pricking pain in his heart at being unable to live up to her wants.

"Mom said no, but I think I deserve a breather for all the university prep I have to do."

A breather, Oe repeated mentally.

"There's a concert next month for this indie band called Still Package. But I already spent all my allowance this month, and I don't have money for tickets. But I wanna go. I know I'm gonna regret it if I don't. I think going to the concert is gonna help me focus on my studying. So please, dad, can you give me 3,000 yen?"

So his daughter was more occupied and engrossed in going to some band's concert, whatever their name was, rather than her university entrance exams, which were merely months away. Oe could not help but sigh. He felt ridiculous for seriously considering switching careers to send a daughter like this to a private university.

"Your mother said no, didn't she?" Oe did not want to give her money, but since saying so to her face would only raise hackles, he transferred the blame to his wife.

"Yeah, but I really wanna go. Dad, please."

His daughter put both palms together in front of her face in a plea. A man's dirt-covered face flashed across Oe's mind. A man who worked day and night, because 'you guys cost a lot of money.' Of course. When you wanted something, you worked for it. *Before you start asking people for money, start thinking of how you could make it yourself*, Oe thought.

"If you want to go so much, why not pick up a part-time job?"

His daughter furrowed her brow indignantly.

"You could buy that ticket with a day's worth of work," Oe continued.

"I'm preparing for university, dad. No one works a part-time job this time of year."

"Then you'll have to give up on going to that concert."

His daughter pursed her lips sourly and turned on her heel. Once in front of the door to her room, she turned around.

"Cheepass," she spat, before slamming the door shut.

"Miharu! Quiet down!" screeched his wife's voice from the bedroom, putting the icing on the cake.

For an instant, Oe wished he could cast everything aside and run away. Right now, he had no attachments. He felt no necessity to nurture, to protect what he had here right now. But an impulse was still an impulse, and Oe had no intention of facing the criticism from all sides if he were to do something like that.

So this is the nest I spent ten-some-odd years to build, Oe thought bitterly as he stood alone in the hallway, his shoulders trembling in laughter.

Oe's guilt towards tricking Kitagawa surfaced once in a while, then ebbed away, but the

period of time between those impulses gradually stretched out. His guilt usually peaked the day after meeting with Kitagawa, but receded like the tides, and eventually he forgot completely until the day before receiving his next hundred thousand yen.

That day was the sixth cash payment. It was in the middle of December. The trees lining the streets were bare, their leaves having turned colour and fallen off a long time ago. Christmas songs were playing everywhere in the streets. However, once Oe walked out of the bright shopping district towards the riverbank, a suddenly loneliness choked the lights and sounds around him. The street lamps turned dim and vague, and the chilly wind that blew over the water blasted him directly in the cheeks. Oe unconsciously gathered the front of his wool coat closer about him. He was just reflecting on how cold it was when it began to rain. The water was frigid. The rain was not heavy, but bothersome nonetheless. Oe quickened his pace. Today he planned to say that he had gone further west than the Kansai region to search centrally around the Chugoku region, but had not found Douno after all. He would tell Kitagawa that much, and once he had the money, he would quit the premises quickly. Oe did not have an umbrella, and if he told Kitagawa he was in a rush, the man would probably not try to pry any further.

Kitagawa was sitting on the usual bench in the park, in a white shirt and black pants. The area was a little ways from the riverside, but the wind was still strong. Oe felt chilly just looking at the man's sparse outfit. He approached, wondering if it was the man's youth that made him unfeeling to the cold.

The man appeared to be sleeping in a sitting position, for even when Oe stood in front of him, he remained slouched over, facing the ground without looking up. His shoulders seemed to be trembling slightly.

"Mr. Kitagawa?" Oe called. The man finally raised his head. Oe was struck speechless. He had noticed the man growing thinner each time they met, but today Kitagawa looked in such appalling condition that he could pass for an invalid. His cheeks were hollowed out, his eyes were sunken, and his lips were purple. He even had a shadow of sparse stubble growing on his face.

"Have you found Dou—" Kitagawa dissolved into a fit of coughing before he could finish his sentence, and it continued for a while before he recovered. Oe did not even need to second-guess that Kitagawa was not well.

"A-Are you alright?"

"It's just a cold." Each time the man spoke, it was followed by a series of hacking coughs.

"You're not dressed warmly enough," Oe said. "You should wear something over your clothes."

Oe noticed that Kitagawa's shirt, which was usually pristine and white, was dirty. The man was usually clad in plain but clean and well-maintained clothes, but this time, the grip of sickness had apparently overpowered him.

"Have you found Douno yet?" Kitagawa asked again, shivering.

"Not yet. I didn't turn up anything in the Chugoku region, so I'm thinking of moving further west and focusing the search on there."

Kitagawa closed his eyes. "I see," he mumbled in a raspy voice. He emitted a loud sneeze, then sniffled his nose. He plunged a hand into his pocket—to get a tissue, Oe presumed—and clawed out a handful of crumpled bills and held them out for Oe.

"I took time off work, so I only have 70,000."

Oe hesitantly accepted the wrinkled bills, and counted them. He verified that there were seven, then hastily put them away into the inner pocket of his coat.

"You can bring the rest next time. Please don't overwork yourself, Mr. Kitagawa."

The man shook his hanging head.

"I'm sure you don't like being kept waiting for these things, right? If you were a loan shark, you wouldn't mind because you could charge interest, but you're not."

So monthly payments of 200,000 yen had been brutal for this man after all. Oe had noticed Kitagawa losing weight alarmingly, and he knew that it probably came from working day and night. But seeing how his half-month payments continued to come in without fail, Oe figured Kitagawa had been managing somehow. He had come this far on good terms. If he pushed this man too far, it would not last very long. If he got the man sick, it would be defeating the very purpose of this arrangement.

"You're a proper man, Mr. Kitagawa, and I trust you that you'll pay, even if it's late. So please, just go home today and rest yourself."

The figure in front of him swayed unsteadily. Oe stepped forward instinctively, thinking the man was going to fall, but Kitagawa only gave a large slump forward and managed to hold himself up.

"I didn't have enough money, so I thought of going to a loan company," Kitagawa said. "But I didn't know how I'd be able to pay them back. I asked the guys at the dorm if they knew any jobs that paid well, and one of them invited me to sell weed with another guy he knew. But that can get you into trouble if you get caught. I have a record already, so if I get into the slammer again, who knows when I'd be able to get out."

"Please don't do anything bad," Oe said, words that he supposed anyone with common sense would say, as he turned over an idea in his head. Suppose Kitagawa got involved in the "weed" (Oe supposed it meant marijuana) selling scheme. He would make money. Then, at a ripe time, Oe would report him to the police. Kitagawa would be arrested and sent to prison. Even if Oe's fraud was exposed, the man would not have the power to harm him because he would be in jail.

It's perfect, isn't it? the devil inside of him whispered. *No, wait, think carefully about it. It's fine while Kitagawa's in jail. But what about when he gets out?* Would Kitagawa not come after him, filled with hatred and an intent to exact revenge on the person who had tricked and reported him behind his back? Oe had been able to collect enough cash already at this point. It was smarter just to get as much as he could without resorting to any clumsy tricks.

Oe grew afraid. He had nothing against Kitagawa; he appreciated the man, who was like a stork that brought him money periodically, but he had found himself wanting to ensnare the man and send him to jail. Oe felt both guilt and superiority towards the man. Kitagawa was, in the end, an ex-convict with a low education. He had no family. Some people would be inconvenienced by his arrest, perhaps, but no one would be sorry to see him go.

"I'll pay you the rest next time. —I'll pay, I promise." Still coughing, Kitagawa slowly got to his feet. He was staggering as he walked away. As Oe watched him, noting how unsteady he was, Kitagawa ran into a pole at the entrance of the park, then sank to his knees on the spot.

"Are you alright, Mr. Kitagawa?" Oe ran over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. It was startlingly hot.

"You have a horrible fever! Are you sure you can walk?"

"Sure I can..."

It looked like Kitagawa was attempting to get to his feet, but his body failed to rise. He was scorching to the touch, and he was shivering. Oe took off his own wool coat and draped it over Kitagawa. Then, he somehow managed to bring Kitagawa to his feet by supporting half of his body.

Oe knew of the Kitajima Steel Factory, where Kitagawa worked. It was not very far. Oe fully intended to take him back to his dorm, but taking even one step made Kitagawa's knees buckle. It

would be impossible for Oe to act as his crutch and walk him home. Oe struggled to bring the taller, massive man out to the road. He flagged a taxi. Kitagawa resisted just as they were about to get on.

"Please, just get inside."

"No. I'm fine." The man clung to the guard rails and refused to move.

"You can't walk on your own, and I'm not going to be able to carry you home."

"The taxi costs money." Even in this condition, the man insisted on scrimping. Oe was, quite truthfully, irritated.

"Don't worry about the money," he said shortly. "I'm going home too, so it's on the way." He practically shoved Kitagawa into the taxi. Once inside, Kitagawa immediately lay down and curled up like a cat. The Kitajima Steel Factory was less than one meter-cycle away, and they arrived in mere minutes. No matter how many times Oe told the man they were getting off, Kitagawa only opened his eyes a sliver and mumbled, "Mmm, yeah," vaguely. Oe managed to drag Kitagawa out of the taxi with the driver's help, and supported the man with his shoulders. By this time, Kitagawa had become a mass of burning flesh.

A rusty plate that read "Kitajima Steel Factory" was nailed on the gate pillar. They entered through the wide-open gates.. Shadows of several buildings, large and small, loomed on the premises, but in the darkness it was impossible to tell which was which. To the right side, Oe could see a light on inside a single-story prefabricated building. He decided he would ask for directions there, and began walking towards the light, carrying the limp man.

The building had a sliding aluminum door, whose top pane was fitted with frosted glass. He could hear deep, booming voices laughing within. When he banged at the door, the noise inside ceased instantly.

"Who is it?" said a voice, sounding anything but welcoming.

"Excuse me. I'd just like to ask you something."

He could see a figure approaching from beyond the frosted glass. The door slid open with a large rattling sound. Oe wrinkled his brow as he was met with a whiff of the sweaty odour of males.

"Whaddaya want?" The man was perhaps around fifty, with a muscular build. He had a ruddy face, and when he spoke he smelled of alcohol. When he noticed the patient Oe was carrying, his expression turned to one of surprise.

"Kitagawa," he said.

"He wasn't feeling well and he couldn't walk, so I brought him here," Oe said. "I heard he lives in the Maple Dorm of this factory."

The man scratched his head, and powdery white flakes flew in the air.

"This is the Maple Dorm."

"Here?" Oe murmured as he took in the inside of the prefabricated hut. Despite its "dorm" name, there were no separate rooms. Instead, there was one large room, about twenty-three square metres in area, with *tatami* mat flooring. The men inside ranged from about twenty to seventy in age, and there were six of them in total, including the brawny man. There were two long fluorescent tube lights on the ceiling, and underneath there was a network of ropes strung from wall to wall like a spider web, with towels and uniforms hung to dry from them like banners.

"Kitagawa's had a fever and he's been in bed these past two days or so," said the brawny man. "At a little past eight, he suddenly disappeared. I was wondering why he was taking so long to take a shit. I guess he was out, huh? Oh, that's his territory, so you can leave him over there."

Oe looked at the spot the man had pointed at, but he only saw a duffel bag and what looked like a pillow. There was no futon.

"Right here?"

"You see his bag there, don't you?" It was a careless tone, with a hint of annoyance at having to repeat himself. Oe laid the limp man down on the spot he had been directed to. The gasoline heater in the room made it much warmer than outside, but Kitagawa still curled up and shivered. Oe glanced around the room, but there were clearly not enough futons for the number of people. If there was a futon, someone was sitting on it as if to assert his ownership. There was also no closet in this hut that could store extra blankets.

"Would I be able to find futons somewhere?" Oe asked an ageing, mild-looking man beside him.

"Old boy Kitagawa always sleeps in a sleeping bag. You see it by his head, there?" He pointed at the oval object that looked like a pillow, placed beside the duffel bag. Oe took it out. It was indeed a sleeping bag. He unravelled it and draped it over the shivering man. Kitagawa rolled himself up in the sleeping bag like a bagworm.

Kitagawa was so weak he could barely walk, yet he had no friends who approached him to see how he was doing or to talk to him. Oe began to worry about leaving him in a group of such uncaring people. Perhaps he ought to take Kitagawa to the doctor, but Kitagawa was the kind of man to refuse a taxi because it cost money. Oe could imagine the rage he would be in if he took the man to a doctor without his permission.

But their association was something that could continue for a long time down the road. Oe did not mind paying for one medical treatment as a necessary business expense. Was Kitagawa even enrolled in national health insurance? He lived in horrid group housing, a dorm in name only. He did not even have his own futon. It would not come as a surprise if he was not enrolled in insurance, in which case, Oe would be footing the full medical bill. He was suddenly reluctant to go ahead with his act of charity.

They may be uncaring, but I'm sure they'll take him to the hospital if it gets that bad. Just as Oe stood up to go home, he remembered that he had lent his coat to Kitagawa. He did not mind collecting the coat later; however, he did want to collect the 70,000 yen in the breast pocket. But Oe could not bring himself to roll the man over so he could snatch the money from him, especially with the man looking like he did now, wrapped up snugly in his coat and sleeping bag like a bagworm.

"Are yeh Douno, mister?" asked an elderly man, appearing out of nowhere. Oe flinched at the uncomfortably close distance. The old man peered into Oe's face from below.

"No, I'm not."

"Old man Tomi, open yer eyes and take a good look," snapped the brawny man. "Not only is that guy old, he looks nothing like Kitagawa's drawing." 'Old man Tomi' furrowed his brow indignantly.

"I used to do the haircuts in the pen, so I've seen Douno's face before," he protested.

Oe did not fail to catch the word "pen".

"Alright, shut up, enough about haircuts. Just shut your mouth," snapped the brawny man. Old man Tomi looked disappointed as he left Oe's side. So this gentle-looking old man had also served time in prison, like Kitagawa had. Perhaps there were many ex-convicts employed at this factory.

Oe turned back to the muscular man.

"Do you know Douno? The person whom Mr. Kitagawa drew the picture of?"

The man narrowed his eyes and grinned, exposing a set of yellowed teeth.

"The guy Kitagawa's always talking about, right? Everyone knows, hey, don't we?"

Laughter erupted from the group. Oe had no idea why the name was enough to make them

laugh.

"I'm always saying he should just get a normal girl since he's out of prison now, but it looks like Kitagawa old boy can't seem to forget his first fuck."

It appeared everyone here knew about Kitagawa and Douno's relationship. Seeing how easily Kitagawa had talked to Oe about homosexuality, it was no surprise that all of his fellow workers would know.

"Are all of you here... um, have you all served a sentence?" Oe had taken great care to choose his words, but the brawny man glared at him.

"What're you gettin' at?" he growled.

"I—I'm a detective," Oe explained hastily. "Actually, Mr. Kitagawa has been asking me to find someone called Douno. If there's anyone here who knows about Douno, or has met him before, I would very much like to speak with them."

The six people in the room all looked at each other.

"Old man Tomi is the only one who's been in the same pen as Kitagawa, right?" said the brawny man, who was apparently the dorm's leader. "Yoshiki and I were in Yamagata. Kimura, you were in Ehime, right? Miyagawa was in Abashiri, and Tohda was in Tottori," he told Oe.

The only person in the same prison as Kitagawa was "old Tomi". He said he had met Douno before, but seeing as how he mistook Oe for him, it was clear his memory was not very reliable. Oe asked if he knew anything just in case, but Tomi's answer was just what he expected.

"Sorry, I don't remember much," he said. "Kitagawa ol' boy sure is faithful, though," he murmured ruefully. The brawny man clicked his tongue angrily.

"He's idiotic, not faithful," he snapped. "The guy didn't leave an address and didn't come to pick Kitagawa up, right? The guy ran. Kitagawa just doesn't wanna admit it."

Oe looked down at the man curled up in a ball and asleep. His breathing, which had been fast and irregular when he arrived, had settled down considerably.

"Y'know something about Douno?" spoke up a long-haired man in glasses, the youngest of the six, who looked to be in his early twenties. "I think it's better if he's not found. Kitagawa's usually quiet, but when he snaps it's pretty scary. Who knows, if Douno happens to be married already, maybe Kitagawa'll stab him."

Stab. Oe felt a chill down his spine at the violent word.

"Oh yeah, Kitagawa was in for murder, right?" the brawny man said casually, as if he were recounting what he ate for dinner.

"Jack the Ripper," said the long-haired man, hunching his shoulders.

"Ehm, and what is this, uh, Jack the—?" bumbled Tomi, tilting his head. The brawny man sighed impatiently.

"A guy who tears his victims apart."

Oe swallowed the saliva that had pooled in his mouth. It went down his throat with a loud gulp.

It wasn't until he got home that Oe realized his wallet was missing from his back trouser pocket. He did not remember putting it in his coat. Perhaps he had dropped it on the way home — but at this point he did not care much. There was not much cash in the wallet anyway, and as for credit cards, all he had to do was freeze them. He didn't need the coat that Kitagawa was curled up in, nor the 70,000 yen inside it. He didn't care about the pittance. He wanted to sever all relations with that man. Right here, right now, if he could.

Oe sat down, propped his elbows on the dining table, and cradled his head in his hands. He

had gone too far. He had never been more wrong in his choice of victim.

Oe had no idea that Kitagawa had killed someone, and not even in the normal sense of stabbing someone in a fit of passion. The man ripped people apart. No one in a stable state of mind could do that.

He had not expected Kitagawa to have committed such a serious crime, considering his age and demeanour. He had left prison five years ago, which meant he had been thirty. Was it possible to get out of prison at thirty for killing someone in such a cruel manner? Wasn't it normal to be imprisoned for fifteen or twenty years for that? Or had he been a minor? Was he still in his teens when he had torn enough people apart to be called "Jack the Ripper"?

Oe sprang out of his seat as if he had been burned, checked the locks on his door, and chained it. He checked the locks in the kitchen and bathroom windows, and as for the living room, he even closed and locked the shutters. He knew that there was no way Kitagawa could come murder him in such a weakened condition, but Oe did not feel rested until he had fixed the locks.

He would be losing his life over a mere five, six hundred thousand yen sum. *Absolutely ridiculous*, he thought. He had to stop the search for Douno before he was discovered. But Kitagawa was sorely attached to the searching for the man. He would probably not be convinced if Oe suddenly brought up the topic of quitting. More than anything, Oe feared that Kitagawa would fly into a temper. In that case, it was not entirely impossible that Oe would get killed.

He heard pattering footsteps. They were coming closer. He could not tell whether they were his wife's or his daughter's, but Oe kept his head down. He was called, but he did not answer. He did not feel like talking to anyone.

A piece of paper was slipped across the table into Oe's vision. On it was a series of numbers. For a moment, Oe could not comprehend what they were.

"I want you take a look at this. Miharu's grades aren't very good." At his wife's words, he finally realized he was looking at a percentile chart. An intense loathing overtook Oe towards the woman for coming to him about such an insignificant matter when there were more important things at hand.

"I'm thinking of sending her to short-term intensive cram school, even just for the winter holidays. They're still taking registrations. It'll be about forty thousand yen, though."

Money again. Money, money, money....

"Besides, she would need to learn the tricks on how to pass the entrance exams."

I didn't care. I never cared about money, but that was all she talked about, so I was forced into frauding a dangerous guy like him.

Oe swept up the percentile chart in front of him and threw it on the ground.

"What the hell was that?" His wife's usual high voice turned so low, it seemed to crawl across the ground.

"If she's not going to study, make her go to work," Oe said.

"Miharu says she wants to go to university. It would be unfair to make her work."

"It's for her own good if she gets out into society, instead of studying pointlessly." When Oe looked up, his wife's face was twisted in fury as she glared at him. Oe felt neither panic nor fear. This woman was not Jack the Ripper. In the end, this was all she amounted to.

"It's your fault that we're poor," she accused. "Do you know how humiliating it is that we can't even give her an education because we can't pay for it?"

Shut up, shut up, shut up! Oe plugged his ears. *This isn't the time to be having arguments like this. I'm going through hell of a lot more right now. If I take one wrong step, it could cost me my life. This and everything is all your fault.*

His wife changed tactics when she saw Oe's stubborn attitude. Suddenly, her voice turned

sickeningly silky.

"Please, will you let her go to cram school? I'm begging you."

Oe's brain began to ache dully. His hands were already full with his own affairs; he wished she would not bother him with trivialities.

"Why don't you use the money that you've saved up behind my back?"

His wife's face suddenly blanched.

"You keep it behind the frame of the painting in the bedroom, don't you? Last time I checked, you had 140,000."

"Y-You—"

"This conversation is over. Get out. I still have work to do!" he snarled at her. His wife bit her lip angrily, then stormed out of the living room. As if fearing for his life wasn't enough, his wife had to add to his troubles with trivial concerns like percentile grades and cram school. If his wife were to die right now, Oe knew he would probably not shed a single tear.

How would he evade Kitagawa? No matter how many possibilities he pondered, the only conclusion he reached was that he would have to stop the search for Douno. If he were to stop, he would have to discuss it with Kitagawa at least once. He would also need a report. Oe brought out his laptop to the living room and began to type up a report at the dining room table. He had not collected his sixth payment yet, but having already received 500,000 yen, he was afraid of what Kitagawa might say if he came out with a report that was half-baked.

I wish Kitagawa's cold would just get worse until he died. Then everything would come to a clean close, without any loose strings to take care of.

But no matter how hard he wished for the man to die, he knew people did not expire that easily. Oe knew it well, which was why he pressed on in his efforts to put a decent-looking report together into the wee hours of the morning.

Every day, in a continuous stream, the television broadcast news of murder. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year, people both young and old were killed. And for the number of people who were killed, there were always killers. Even if they were caught and imprisoned, once they completed their sentences, they came out again. It was a perfectly logical thing, yet Oe had never thought about it. It was unpleasant. No one liked the idea that someone beside them could be a psychotic killer.

Perhaps the temperature had dropped early in the morning—there was a layer of frost over the grass at the side of the road. Oe sat being bumped along by the train, staring absently out of the windows, which were clouded white with water droplets.

It had been five days since he took Kitagawa back to his dorm at the Kitajima Steel Factory. The following day after he had found out Kitagawa was a murderer, Oe was constantly on guard, thinking Kitagawa would come bursting into his office or apartment in a rage, but as one day passed, and then another, Oe began to feel reassured that it was not going to happen.

He had done nothing suspicious around Kitagawa. He had met the man at the park, just as he promised, and had reported his progress. He had neither fled nor hidden. He had never pressured Kitagawa, even if payments came late, and he had even been considerate and told the man not to overwork himself. Unless something could convince Kitagawa that Oe was suspicious and make him dig deeper, Oe would never be exposed.

Oe got off the train and made his way down the sidewalk. This morning, he was planning to hand over a report of an extramarital affair investigation to his client. The husband had commissioned the investigation. His wife turned out to be deeply infatuated with a host who was

five years younger than her.

Oe had no idea what the husband planned to do once he received the report. When Oe had reported the progress to him over the phone, the man's responses had been calm and unruffled. Perhaps he was going to get a divorce.

Oe admitted that he was also tempted to cut off the shackles that bound his feet in the form of his wife and daughter. In his opinion, if it weren't for these two existences in his life, he would not have had to resort to criminal fraud.

His wife stopped complaining after he pointed out her secret savings. He had no idea whether she was still planning to send their daughter to cram school or not. Either way, he did not care.

He turned a corner, and was not more than twenty metres away from his office when a voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Mr. Oe." Oe flinched and turned around. Standing beside a vending machine near the hedges of a five-storey building was the last man he had wanted to see.

Kitagawa was wearing an old-fashioned black greatcoat.

"Are you working right now?"

Oe's violent palpitations made his chest hurt. Unable to speak, Oe half-trembled, half-shook his head.

"You told me before not to talk to you in public, so I was wondering what to do. But I wanted to give this back as soon as I could."

In his proffered hand was the wallet Oe had given up for lost.

"This—"

"You must've been in trouble without it. I'm sorry. Old man Tomi got his hands on it when you brought me back to the dorm the other day. I was wondering why he had a wallet exactly the same as yours, so I pulled a bluff on him and he spilled the beans. He might be a frail geezer now, but he's still got his light touch. He said he couldn't help it when there was such a fat-looking wallet dangling in front of him. I told him off good, and I replaced whatever the old man spent. So please, I wanna ask you not to go to the police about this."

The wallet Oe had thought he lost had actually been stolen by a pickpocketing old man, and Kitagawa had brought it back. It was such a simple diagram of events, but Oe's nervous mind struggled to sort it out.

"Old man Tomi's a ripe age now, and if he gets put into jail again he's never gonna be able to get out. That's why—"

"I—I won't go to the police. I didn't have that much money in there anyway, and you gave it back to me in the end."

Relief crossed Kitagawa's face. "I'm really sorry," he said, bowing his head deeply. Oe wondered why he was being apologized to, then realized he was now in a superior position. He had been stolen from, been apologized to, and he had forgiven, which made him superior.

"And I'll give this back to you. Sorry for keeping it for so long." The dry cleaner's bag that was handed to him contained his wool coat.

"And this." A wad of bills held together with an elastic band was held out also. "I took out 5,000, so it's 65,000 now. I bought some food and medicine with it. For the rest of the amount, can I give it to you in instalments? Of course, if I make more, I'll pay you each time."

Oe had wanted to end the investigation, but now Kitagawa was talking of paying in instalments.

"My cold's much better now. You took me home from the park that day, right? Sorry for the trouble. I knew it was starting to get cold outside, but I had nothing to wear because I sold my

coat. But now I know that nothing's gonna come of it if I get sick and can't work, so I'll be careful next time."

The wad of crumpled bills seemed to carry an immense weight. Oe remembered what he had said to his wife a good while ago.

"You have enough to wear to keep you warm. Don't be greedy." His wife had argued back with, *"That's not enough."* And because it was "not enough" by his own standards, Oe had driven a total stranger into selling his coat in order to pay him.

Oe's head drooped, and his line of sight caught the fray on the mouth of Kitagawa's coat sleeve.

"You can actually find a lot of stuff to wear from things that people've cast off. Old man Tomi found this for me on garbage day. Oh, right. Old man Tomi is also the one who paid for your coat to get dry cleaned. He says it was the least he could do to apologize."

Stop putting your poverty on display, Oe thought contemptuously. *You should know how embarrassing it is to wear something that's been thrown out once. You have no common sense. You have no dignity.*

But it did not matter how much Oe placed the man below him. Kitagawa was a decent working man. He was only poor because Oe was syphoning all of his wages. If Kitagawa had a net income of close to 200,000 yen a month, he would probably have no problem buying a coat or a futon. If he saved up a little, perhaps he could even move into an apartment.

Oe's fear towards Kitagawa's Jack-the-Ripper persona had not diminished; but the more he talked to the man, the weaker the impression became. Perhaps it was because he could not detect any evil in the man's words.

Oe knew that now was the time he could bring it up; now was the only time to say it.

"Mr. Kitagawa, are you off work today?"

"By the hour," Kitagawa said, with his hands still in his pockets. "I wanted to see you, so I took the morning off."

"Would I be able to take you out for a bit? There are... things I'd like to discuss with you."

Kitagawa tilted his head slightly. "Sure," he said nevertheless.

They entered a cafe called Royal, situated in a back alley behind the station. One could tell it was run down from its very storefront, and it was a cafe Oe had never entered before. If he went to a cafe he frequented, he would probably run into his chief; if he went to a slightly fashionable one, there was a possibility he would run into Katori or Nobeoka. He wanted to avoid both situations at all costs.

He had not chosen to go to the park today partly out of consideration for Kitagawa, since being in the cold would not be good for a man just recovering from an illness. The other part, his honest reason, was because he did not want to be alone with this man in a deserted park. If by any chance they should get into an argument, he knew as long as he was surrounded by people, someone was bound to help.

Kitagawa hesitated slightly before entering the cafe, which caught Oe's eye. He was reminded of the man's saving habits, which were so strict he refused to take the taxi even when he was too ill to walk.

"I invited you out, so I'll handle the bill," Oe said, one step ahead of Kitagawa.

"I'm not penniless, you know," the man answered, smiling wryly.

The sign outside was so faded it was hard to make the name of the cafe out, and the interior was just as pitiful. The light-green vinyl couch had turned dark from grime, and there were

conspicuous tears in the upholstery. The menus wedged into the holder were also dirty with fingerprints and food stains.

Kitagawa kept his coat on even after entering the cafe. The front was buttoned up, which made his whole outfit black. He looked like a bat.

They both ordered coffee. The owner of the cafe, a bald, surly man perhaps in his sixties, took their order with an almost angry expression on his face.

"Up until now, I've been searching for Mr. Douno with a focus on city halls," Oe began. "Yesterday, I finished the search in the Kyushu region, but I wasn't able to find any new information about Mr. Douno. The only regions that are left are Okinawa and Hokkaido, but since you've told me Mr. Douno had no strong accent, I'm sure we can exclude the far north and south regions from our search. From experience, I have to say that without new information, it will be very difficult to find him."

The man listened to Oe solemnly.

"Mr. Kitagawa, you're straining yourself considerably to pay for my investigation fees, aren't you?"

The man blinked in surprise. "Not really," he said.

"You were working night and day. All that exhaustion must have led to your bad cold."

"But my cold has nothing to do with you, does it?" the man asked in bewilderment. Oe was slightly irritated at the man for not picking up his cue.

"Alright, then let me say this plainly. No matter how much we continue the search, Mr. Douno will not be found. Mr. Kitagawa, you'll only be creating more burden for yourself. Why don't we call off the investigation for now? You should work on regaining your strength, then when you have a little more money to spend comfortably, you can have someone resume the search in a way that won't tax you so much."

Kitagawa tipped his head and scratched the back of it.

"I know you guys cost a lot of money. I'm still asking you despite that."

"But—"

"I know I won't have to work night and day if I stop searching. But I *want* you to search for him. It's my own selfishness. And since I'm being selfish, I have to deal with it if I'm sleepy or if I'm hungry, or if I'm cold."

This man understands—the fact suddenly dawned on Oe. He did not have to go out of his way to explain each and every thing; this man knew what he had to do, and how to do it.

"I understand your dedication to this, Mr. Kitagawa. But it's been hard on me to investigate Mr. Douno alongside my main job. Since I've just finished investigating the Kyushu region, I think this is a good place to draw the line. —Please, let me end this investigation."

Kitagawa remained silent and refused to give assent.

Oe's pressuring tone still yielded no answer from him. Their coffees were brought amidst the silence. Oe was prepared for the instant coffee that was served, but it was still disgusting to taste. Kitagawa did not even touch his. Things would go nowhere if they continued in silence.

"I'm sure Mr. Douno is living his own life out there somewhere," Oe said. "Mr. Kitagawa, you deserve to start living your own life, too."

After a long, long silence, Kitagawa finally opened his mouth.

"You're telling me to give up," he said bluntly, in an almost sullen way.

"I think it will make things easier for both you and Mr. Douno."

The man fell silent again. It was quiet inside the cafe. There were no other customers inside, nor were there any coming in. The owner was reading the newspaper behind the counter. Oe glanced at his watch. He had to get back to his office within the next half-hour to meet his client

who was coming to pick up his report.

"Are you married?" came a sudden question after the long silence.

"Me? I am. I have a wife and daughter."

"How would you feel if someone told you to divorce and marry someone else?"

Oe cocked his head.

"Would you do as you were told and divorce her?"

"I don't know what you mean. Why would I have to divorce my wife and marry another woman?"

"Because that's what you're telling me to do."

Apparently Kitagawa was using Oe's marriage as an analogy for his and Douno's relationship.

"Our situations are totally different, Mr. Kitagawa."

"They're the same."

"We're proper husband and wife under the law. It's not a romantic relationship."

"I'm not talking about rules. I'm talking about the heart."

Oe hesitated at Kitagawa's claim about the heart. He had wasn't sure what Kitagawa was trying to say, but he could infer the gist of it.

"I go to work because I want to see Douno," Kitagawa said. "If I don't work and make money, I can't pay to have him looked for. Everyone tells me to give up. But I have nothing else I want to do or buy."

Oe's throat was parched. He had drained his coffee during their silence. Oe swallowed a mouthful of water, which was revolting and gave off an odour.

"I always think about it—about what I could do to find Douno. No matter how much I think, I have no idea what I can do. But you guys can find him because you're pros, right? If I study and become a detective, would I be able to look for Douno myself?"

Oe could not give an answer.

"Do I need some kind of license to be a detective? Do I have to be out of university?"

Oe realized that "giving up" was simply not an option for this man. An unhappy, pitiful man for being unable to give up—that was what Oe thought.

"I think I've told you this before," he began, "but detectives aren't all-powerful, nor are we perfect. And in this world, there are things that can be done and things simply can't. As proof of that, I was unable to find Mr. Douno."

He saw Kitagawa chew his lip.

"Give up on Mr. Douno," Oe said. "You say you don't have anything you want or want to do, but if you keep on living, that will change. I'm sure you'll find something to replace him."

Oe spoke tentatively towards the man who sat staring silently his feet, a man for whom giving up was not a choice. He earnestly thought he was doing what was best for this man by placing a concluding period on his futile feelings.

The day after talking to Kitagawa, Oe sent a package to the Maple Dormitory of Kitajima Steel Factory, containing the borrowed reports and his own report, which spanned twenty pages. "If you have any questions, please feel free to ask," he wrote, with his cellular e-mail address. He knew Kitagawa did not own a cell phone, but he did not want to give the man his number.

A week passed after mailing the report, and there was no contact from Kitagawa. If the man really had to contact him, he would probably use an Internet cafe or borrow someone's cell phone. Oe interpreted his lack of communication as a sign that Kitagawa was satisfied with his report.

Thus, his short relationship with Jack the Ripper came to an end. Oe managed to garner the entire amount of five hundred and sixty-five thousand yen without being exposed for fraud. He would be lying if he said he did not feel guilty, but in the end, he had still given valuable life lessons to that man.

Oe felt like Kitagawa would continue his search forever, unfazed by failure. Perhaps the man was happiest while he was searching. Happiness for him was probably waiting and longing for the day to be reunited with Douno, or an idealized figure of him which his memories had created. However much money that man ended up spending, or whether he fell ill from overwork, was none of Oe's business now. The man had already exited the stage on which his fraud had been enacted.

The year was coming to a close, with only three days left. One afternoon, and Oe was in the middle of putting his arms through his coat sleeves to go out for some questioning when the doorbell of the office rang. Nobeoka went to get it immediately. The man who entered was of medium stature and build and appeared to be in his sixties. He was bespectacled and holding a small black leather bag. He was dressed smartly, and had a dignified air. His aura bespoke a president of a town factory.

"I'm here because I heard that a detective by the name of Mr. Oe works here."

Oe was surprised to be specified by name. It looked like the bespectacled man did not know him by face, for he made the smooth explanation to Nobeoka even while the man in question was standing close by.

"An acquaintance of mine had his case taken care of by Mr. Oe. I've heard he was very nice to him, so I was wondering if I might ask Mr. Oe to take my case."

It was common to get clients through word-of-mouth. Nobeoka was glancing this way. Oe's questioning today only consisted of going around to random houses in the vicinity of the target's neighbourhood, and he had no set time schedule. He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger in an "OK" sign to Nobeoka, then slowly approached the man in the glasses.

"Hello. Nice to meet you. I'm Oe."

The man opened his mouth as if surprised.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Shiba," he said immediately afterwards, offering his hand for a handshake. Oe directed the man to the guests' sofa, and sat down across from him.

"May I ask, just for reference? Who did you hear about me from?"

Shiba placed his bag on the table as he spoke. "Seiichi Saito," he said with a smile. In Oe's twenty-plus years as a detective, he had had several dozen clients with the last name of Saito. He did not remember full names, unless they were particularly memorable clients. But Oe could not bring himself to say he didn't know.

"I see," he smoothed it over.

The man, who had been smiling pleasantly until now, suddenly leaned forward and dropped his voice.

"Now, you see, it seems like this acquaintance of mine, he's... how shall I say this? I think he's been victim to a fraud. But I don't have any definitive evidence. This is where I'd like for you to come in and investigate, Mr. Oe."

What a troublesome job, Oe thought. All fraudster types tended to be extremely careful. They were cautious not to leave any clues behind.

"I'd just like to know before I start discussing things with you," Shiba began, "ah, around how much is your fee? Is it really about 200,000 yen a month, like they say?" The man looked concerned. Investigation fees were not cheap; Oe could understand Shiba's apprehension about the price.

"Well, let's see," Oe began, stroking his chin with his fingertips. "It can range depending on the type of investigation, which would affect the number of people working on the case. For example, an investigation using only the phone and computer would come to about a 150,000 to a 160,000 a month, plus necessary expenses. Investigations that need footwork—tailing, and such—will require more manpower, which would drive up the price."

"A hundred and fifty to sixty thousand. That's rather expensive," Shiba sighed, then hunched his shoulders. "Do you also happen to charge by the half-hour for consultation, like some lawyers do?"

Oe laughed. "Consultation is free. We only start charging after we've contracted with the client and begun the investigation."

"That's a relief," said Shiba, his face relaxing.

"For fraud, depending on the details, it may be better to leave things to the police rather than asking us to investigate. Would you be able to tell me some specifics about your situation?" Oe proposed. For some reason, Shiba grinned.

"The person I want you to investigate is actually a detective. My acquaintance asked a certain detective to personally investigate the whereabouts of a certain man. The period of the investigation was two and a half months, and the fee was 565,000 yen. In the end, the man was never found, but I did get to see the detective's investigation report."

Oe clasped his hands tighter in his lap. It wasn't even hot, yet sweat was pouring off his back. Who was this man? What was he?

Shiba let out a testy sigh, then rested his chin on his right hand.

"And what this detective did was he called city halls all over the country to see if he could find any acquaintances of this man. The report had a list of all the city hall names and telephone numbers. The ones that he called but couldn't get a good answer were marked with an 'X'. At first, I was impressed at how detailed and thorough detectives were, but there was one town which he mistook for a city. It happened to be near my wife's hometown, which is why I noticed. But you see, that box was also marked with an 'X'. If the detective had actually looked it up and called, he would have found out that it was a 'town hall' and not a city hall. I thought this was very strange. So I called up some city halls on the list, and all of them claimed there had been no phone call inquiring about a Douno. I could understand maybe one or two—maybe they'd forgotten—but *all* of them told me the same thing. Sounds kind of fishy, doesn't it?"

Oe's saliva made a loud gurgling noise in his throat as he swallowed it. He was terrified of this man in front of him. He had no idea what the man was thinking. The man knew the truth about Oe's fraud, yet he was not angry, nor did he seem to intend to blame him. He spoke calmly of it as if it were someone else's affair.

"I think writing a report saying you investigated even though you haven't is a clear act of fraud. If this detective actually did the work, the numbers that he called should be in the call history of his phone at home, on his cell phone, or on the phone at his office. If we could look into that, I think we could prove that the detective was conducting a fraud, don't you think?"

Oe's hands, his knees, began to tremble. *What should I do, what should I do, what should I do...* just the thought made his head feel like it was about to explode. One look at his call history and everything would be over for him. Would he be able to scrape by by saying he called from a public telephone? Perhaps he could force his way past the telephone issue with that argument, but if someone were to verify the fact with all of the city halls in his list, he would not be able to explain it away.

Oe was overcome with regret. He had done it to make the report look thick so it would visually satisfy Kitagawa as well. He had made the list of city halls to gain pages, not bothering to

look it over once, assuming Kitagawa would not scrutinize a list of place names and phone numbers.

The sofa on which Shiba sat creaked slightly.

"But what irks me the most is that I smell some bad intentions coming from this detective. He claimed it was a personal contract, so he didn't draw up the paperwork. He didn't issue receipts for the cash payments he received. It kind of makes me wonder if he didn't go in planning to trick his client from the very beginning."

Their conversation lapsed momentarily. As if to seize on the opportunity, Nobeoka brought them tea.

"Oh, why thank you," Shiba said, inclining his head politely. He took a sip. "Well, but it's true that I don't have any proof. A verbal agreement was all the detective and client had between them. The report's also not handwritten, and there's no name attached. If the other end were to say he knows nothing about it, and that I'm making stuff up, that would be the end of that. But the thing is—the detective's met with the client's co-workers, and told them he was a detective and that he was looking for a certain man. They've all got pasts they'd rather not talk about, but numbers speak loudly. If we get five or six of them to testify, I think we'd be able to prove it somehow."

An image of himself getting arrested for fraud flashed across Oe's mind. The disappointed gaze of his chief, who had trusted him. The disdainful gazes of Katori and Nobeoka. He would get fired from his job and his income would cease altogether. His wife would divorce him, and his daughter would be unable to go to cram school, much less university. For mere pocket money, a measly 600,000 yen, the entire forty-eight years of his life that he built up would be negated because of one rash idea.

Oe looked up, but he could not meet Shiba's eyes. He was like a frog being stared down by a hungry snake. He didn't feel like he could escape once he was reported to the police. Perhaps—perhaps it wasn't too late. He could smooth things over before the matter ballooned out of hand, before the police got involved.

"—I'll... I'll give the money back." Oe shook like a leaf as he stuttered in a voice barely louder than the chirp of a bird.

"Of course he'll pay the money back, if we manage to nab the detective," Shiba said in a matter-of-fact way. "That's beyond question. But to be done with that? Well, my acquaintance might be willing to forgive and forget, but it just doesn't seem like enough to me. I want the man to really *know* what he's done."

He smiled pleasantly at Oe.

"If you do something bad, you should be punished equally under the law. As humans, we need to follow these rules. Don't you think so, Mr. Oe?"

Ignoring Oe, whose lips were trembling for an answer, Shiba got to his feet.

"Alright. I guess that means I should really go to the police instead of a detective agency. We didn't get any further than a consultation after all, but this has given me a very good picture of things. Thank you."

But I haven't said anything. I haven't said anything. However, Shiba inclined his head as if they had just finished a very productive discussion indeed, turned on his heel, and made for the exit. Oe sprang to his feet to go after the man, but he lost his balance and ended up tripping head-first over nothing between two desks.

"A-Are you alright, Mr. Oe?" Nobeoka ran up to him, but Oe violently pushed him aside and half-tumbled down the stairs. He burst out of the office building and glanced left and right. Across the street was Shiba about to turn a corner.

"W-Wait! Wait a minute!" Oe ran as fast as his unsteady legs would carry him, and caught

Shiba by the arm just as he went around the bend.

"Whatever you do, please don't go to the police. I'll pay the money back. I'll compensate, pay extra for the trouble I caused. Please, I have a wife and daughter at home. My daughter's going to university next year, and—"

A look of contempt. The man's thick eyebrow twitched.

"It would cost money to send my daughter to school," Oe continued, "and I needed the—the money—that's why—"

The corners of Shiba's mouth jerked up as if he were smiling. Oe's clinging hands were roughly shaken off, and Oe collapsed to his knees on the cement sidewalk.

"Does everyone who's in need of money trick other people to get it, like you did?"

The sky was leaden. The wind whipping his cheeks was icy.

"Yours is just an excuse."

The statement sliced through Oe's heart. Even his fingertips felt the pain. But he could not let this man leave, no matter what. Oe clung to the feet of the man who carried his fate in his hands.

"I'm—I'm begging you. Please forgive me. I'll do anything—anything, so please, just don't go to the police. My daughter, my little girl—agh!"

A kick sent Oe crashing backwards into the guard rails. The impact made his breath catch.

"You should be apologizing to Kitagawa, not me."

Tears sprang to Oe's eyes, tears of pain and humiliation. *How could this happen?* he thought. *Why—?* The passersby threw curious glances at the bawling middle-aged man not even attempting to hide his tears. Their gazes pricked Oe in passing.

"Tell me something, Mr. Oe." Shiba's eyes were now level with Oe, who sat slumped on the ground. "Do you know how much Kitagawa makes in a month?"

Trembling violently, Oe shook his head.

"At the steel factory, he works six days a week, from eight in the morning to eight at night. That's 110,000. Still far from the 200,000 he needs. So from nine at night to five in the morning the next day, he worked at construction sites. Three days a week of that, and that's 70,000 a month. But that still wasn't enough, so he worked all day on Sundays, too."

The image of Kitagawa's dirt-stained face at the nighttime construction site crossed Oe's mind.

"But all that work still couldn't buy the man a decent living. He couldn't even get a decent meal. When I saw him, he was nibbling on mouldy bread crusts like they were the best things he'd eaten, you piece of shit!"

Shiba's angry yell sent spit flying into Oe's face.

"Tell me, shouldn't you have been the one nibbling on bread crusts, hm?"

Oe's gritted teeth chattered, but not from the cold. Kitagawa had been growing thinner each time they met—he knew. He knew, but had pretended not to notice.

"I—I'm sorry."

Shiba opened his leather bag in front of Oe. He took out a voice recorder with a microphone attached to it.

"Our conversation at the office should be in here, too. You said you would pay the money back. That's hard proof right there. You won't be able to talk your way out of this one. This is the end for you."

The end, the end. The words spun around inside his head. Oe cradled his head in his hands. Fresh tears spilled out of his wet eyes.

"Gh... agh... augh..." Noises, somewhat akin to whimpering, spilled from his half-open

mouth.

Shiba, who had been looking at him in disgust, narrowed his eyes.

"Do you want me to call off going to the police?"

Oe nodded vigorously as his whole body trembled and snot dripped from his nose.

"I'm the only one who knows you've been tricking Kitagawa," Shiba said. "I heard his story, read the report, and did research on my own because it was bothering me. Kitagawa doesn't suspect a thing about you."

Amidst despair and tragedy, Oe's heart gave a painful throb.

"I'll keep quiet to both Kitagawa and the police. But in exchange, you're going to find Douno within three months from today."

"Th—That's impossible!" Oe shook his head jerkily. "I only know his name, his age, and his occupation before he went to prison. There's no way I can find him with this information alone. Larger agencies have tried searching and failed."

"That's none of my concern." Shiba shrugged lightly. "I'm giving you a suspension on your sentence, and this is it. You better search as if your life depended on it. If you can't find him after three months, I'm tipping the police off. Enjoy your time in the slammer."

Oe was given no choice. If he wanted to protect his family, his current life, he would have to do whatever it took to find Douno, even if it was like combing through all the sand on the beach for a grain of rice.

"Alrighty," Shiba grunted as he straightened out of his crouch. He looked down at Oe, who was still squatting on the ground. "Shall we go back to your office, then? I won't tell you to do the work for free. I think I can tolerate an agreement to be your client, and that way you can be open about the search. And let me remind you that I'm not threatening you. This is a legitimate job."

Shiba underwent all the necessary procedures and became Oe's official client. Oe had no time to lose to uncertainty or hesitation. He had only three months. If he could not find Douno within three months, he would be reported to the police and would lose everything he had. All the time he could get was not enough for an investigation with as little information as this, and he could not afford to waste a minute.

Oe had officially taken the case on December 29, right before all of Japan entered the year-end holidays. Immediately after opening the case, Oe made a furious succession of phone calls to city halls in the Kanto region and surrounding areas. In five continuous hours of calling, he had only been able to confirm a response from four locations. Starting the next day, all of Japan's city halls closed as they entered their New Year holidays, forcing Oe to suspend his investigation temporarily.

The New Year dawned, and business resumed on the fourth. Oe plunged himself again into the task of bombarding city halls with phone calls. He had considered writing e-mails instead, but written language carried less of an impact than a direct vocal conversation. Most likely he would be brushed off politely by e-mail. It took Oe a month to cover all of the city halls in the nation, calling every day from nine in the morning to when the offices closed at five in the evening. Even after all the effort he had expended, he was unable to acquire any information about Douno working at any of those locations.

Oe pleaded with Shiba to borrow Douno's search reports from Kitagawa without letting him know who was asking for them. The reports had been left in the same state as when Oe gave them back, for the scrap of paper with the sketch of Douno was still left inside. Oe scattered the reports across the living room, taking point-form notes of snippets that caught his eye, and

thought hard. His wife and daughter regarded him apprehensively from afar.

Just as an agency had done in a past report, Oe tried frequenting Internet sites that attracted groping enthusiasts. He pretended to be a forum-goer, and made a lighthearted post asking if anyone had gone to jail for groping. He received many replies, and a few among them had been arrested before, though they had merely been indicted and charged a fine. They had not served jail sentences. In fact, those who got themselves into jail were criticized for being “clumsy”.

According to groping enthusiasts, there were far more disadvantages to serving a sentence. One would lose his job and social status, and if one was married, he could possibly be pushed into a divorce. If things could be settled with a mere couple ten-thousands in fines, there was no reason to do otherwise. Then why had Douno gone to prison for groping? Oe could think of no other reason than that Douno's case had been malicious enough to warrant it. However, according to the references he had on hand, Douno was a first-time offender, and there was nothing to confirm the possibility of him being a habitual groper.

An upright man working at city hall who transformed into a malevolent groper. Perhaps Douno was two-faced. And surely his groper side was his true self.

A man as malevolent as him was bound to frequent enthusiast websites like these, but no matter how many juicy topics Oe dropped, he failed to catch anyone in his net suggestive of Douno.

His prospects, his future, his life, depended on it. As Oe continued the desperate search for Douno, he was simultaneously aware of his growing hatred towards the man. If Douno looked seedy enough to match his personality, it was consolation enough; but Kitagawa's sketch showed a man who looked like he wouldn't hurt a fly, and was average as average could be. Yet the man coolly and brazenly engaged in these appalling deeds. Kitagawa adored Douno, but the fact that Douno had seduced another man while having a female lover already gave a glimpse into the kind of immoral man that he was.

What would ever come of finding a man like him? Every time Oe hit a wall in his search, he mentally badmouthed the man between his masses of scattered research material. Douno had the man so in love with him, but had not even come to pick him up when he was released. Even if Douno was found, and even if he and Kitagawa were to meet again, Kitagawa would probably only end up being politely brushed off. Just imagining what was waiting for this man at the end of his desperate search made Oe feel pity for Kitagawa, although as one who had tricked him, he was not entitled to say much. Nevertheless, Kitagawa did not deserve this.

Douno should never be found. They should never meet again. But despite what Oe personally thought, his assignment still had a deadline, and his future still depended on it. For his own sake, Oe had no choice but to devote his entire being into searching for Douno, this despicable man.

Oe's daughter had apparently applied for both national and private universities, but Oe himself had no idea. The results from the private university came first, and she had successfully been offered admission. Oe found this out through a congratulatory phone call from his wife's mother. His wife had told him nothing. According to his wife's mother, the results from the national university were yet to be released.

Oe had previously thought it flatly impossible to send his daughter to a private university, but at this point he did not care anymore. If it came to it, he would make her work a part-time job, and he would start working for the construction company. It would work out somehow.

What wasn't going to work out was the search for Douno. No matter where he looked or what stone he turned over, he was unable to find even a fragment of a lead. He was doing anything but whiling time away, but time still seemed to whizz by. By the time he had entered the last month of his investigation, Oe's stress level had reached its peak.

It was already March, yet it had been snowing since morning. Oe used his lunch break to call Shiba out of work and meet him at a coffee shop close to the factory.

Shiba worked at the same Kitajima Steel Factory as Kitagawa. Kitagawa had been working there first, and Shiba had come into the factory in December of the last year. The two had apparently first met in their shared cell in prison, but had grown distant after being released. When they reunited at the factory, Shiba was so shocked by how thin Kitagawa had become that he thoroughly interrogated him on why he had become that way. The resulting end point had been Oe's fraud.

"I've exhausted my options."

It was lunch hour, and the coffee shop was crowded. The sign outside fashionably indicated in French that the shop was a cafe, and many of the customers were young. Amidst them, the harrowed-looking detective in his forties and the man in his sixties across from him, wearing a jumpsuit embroidered with the words "Kitajima Steel Factory", were sorely out of place.

However, at this point Oe had no energy to spare in selecting a suitable coffee shop, nor did he care whether they would stand out or not.

"Run out of options, huh? Isn't it your job to find people?" Shiba exhaled a short puff of cigarette smoke. His cavalier tone only further irritated Oe's wrung nerves.

"I've said this many times before, but we simply don't have enough information. I can't even narrow down the search range. I need to know more about Douno. Even whether he had a slight accent or not. Anything, no matter how small."

"Douno? He spoke clean, standard Japanese. He didn't have an accent."

"Are you sure he didn't have any kind of accent at all?"

"You're a persistent one," Shiba smiled drily. Upon thorough consideration, Oe decided to conduct the investigation again focused on city halls. Yes, it was over six years ago, but Douno had definitely worked at one. There had to be some remaining proof of it. If Oe could find out which city hall he worked at, he would be able to find Douno's acquaintances. If Douno kept in contact with them, he would be able to find out Douno's address.

Oe mentally abandoned the regions far-flung from Tokyo. Some people spoke standard Japanese in non-urban areas, but he had to narrow it down to the more urban centre, where he had a better chance.

"Douno was imprisoned for indecent assault, right? Did he say anything about whether it was in a train or in a park, and if it was a train, did he mention which line it was on?"

Shiba knitted his brow and folded his arms. "Hmm," he quietly thought aloud. "He wasn't the type to go on and on about himself much."

"Even the tiniest thing. Please try to remember."

The man lapsed deep in thought. "Come to think of it," he said finally, "I remember Douno saying he was wrongly accused."

"Wrongly accused?" Oe repeated.

"The pen is full of people claiming false accusations, but Douno might have been telling the truth. There was no way to tell, since his sentence was already finalized, but..."

"Why did you believe Douno was falsely accused, as opposed to everyone else?"

Shiba scratched his temple.

"That's not an easy question to answer," he said. "I guess it was because he was normal. He was honest and compassionate. There are a lot of guys in the pen who *seem* like good people, but fakers will always let slip somewhere. Douno was never two-faced like that, and I suppose he'd always lived in a way where he never had to fake himself."

Shiba left the coffee shop first, mentioning that his lunch break was only forty minutes. Oe

bent over double the table, staring intently at the words he had noted down.

“Standard Japanese, Kanto region, city hall, honest, not two-faced, falsely accused.”

Oe put himself in Douno’s shoes. Perhaps Douno was actually guilty, but for the sake of argument, Oe simulated a scenario where Douno was innocent.

He was an honest, normal man who worked at city hall. He was accused of groping, but because he was unable to prove his innocence, he was imprisoned. As a result, he was forced to terminate his job. His social status plummeted to the ground. He was left with a criminal record. Now that Oe thought about it, it was a cruel story, indeed. He had done nothing. Douno’s anger at the unfairness of it all must have been enough to keep him awake at night.

Even after finishing his sentence and being set free, he would probably not be happy. Why? Because his time in prison and his criminal record would all have been “unnecessary” if it was indeed a false accusation.

Why did he have to get arrested? Why did he have to go to prison? Who was to blame? To whom was he to direct his anger? Was it the police, who mistakenly arrested him? If it was a groping incident, there must have been a victim. Would it be the victim, who wrongly thought he was the groper? What could he do to relieve his mind of this irritation?

Oe left the coffee shop trapped in his agonized thoughts. He continued to imagine, still in Douno’s shoes. If the police had done a proper investigation when he was arrested, they would have been able to find out that he was not the perpetrator. However, his sentence had been finalized and he had served it; even if he claimed a false accusation now, no one would take him seriously.

This is unbearable. Oe ground his teeth. The only people who would understand how I feel, who would understand this suffering I’m going through, are people who have fallen victim to the same situation as me—only other people who have been charged with a crime they didn’t commit because the police didn’t investigate properly.

A beacon suddenly flared in Oe’s head. What if—what if there was an advocacy group for those who had suffered false accusations? Wouldn’t that be all that Douno wished for and more? They were fellow comrades who carried the same wounds as him.

Oe had broken into a sprint. He tore up the stairs of the building and burst into the office. In his frenzy he almost crashed into Nobeoka, and as he hastily veered to the right to avoid him, he banged his ribs against the edge of the desk. It was painful, but he had no time to stop and feel it.

He could barely wait for the computer to start up. As he sat in his chair, he slapped the desk impatiently with his hand. The keywords he entered into the search engine were “train groping” and “false accusation”. A sliver of light had shone into this chaotic darkness. For the first time in several years, Oe was feeling a rush of anticipation course through his entire body.

What surprised Oe was that there were actually many cases of false accusations over groping—he had just never heard about them. He also learned that there were many groups supporting those who had been falsely accused.

If one was arrested for groping, all he had to do was admit the crime, which would make it a light offence. The case would end in a summary indictment and a fine. On the other hand, if he did not admit to the crime, the case would be taken to court. The victim, unable to prove his innocence, would follow the worst-possible route of a guilty verdict and resulting imprisonment.

Douno had probably continued to plead not guilty, but gone unacknowledged and been imprisoned as a result. Yet, despite his imprisonment, he still fought. For a man with a will as strong as his, it would only be natural to join a support group for the falsely-accused after getting

out of prison.

Oe fabricated a back story for himself: he was Taketoshi Matsuzaki, a forty-five-year-old salaryman. He had been arrested for groping when he had done nothing. When he continued to deny the crime in the face of the police's intimidation, he was slapped with a guilty verdict based solely on the woman's testimony, and as a result he had gone to prison. Armed with this story, Oe contacted a group called "Support for Victims Falsely Accused of Molestation".

"If there's someone in your group who has served time in prison for a false accusation of groping, like me, I want to talk to him in person. Could you introduce me to someone?" Oe proposed. The vice-manager of the organization called Kanou appeared hesitant on the other line. He explained that the group was particularly strict with the management of privacy, especially because they dealt with false accusations of sex crimes. In addition, there was also the Personal Information Protection Law, which prevented him from easily giving out members' addresses and names.

"But I do understand how you feel about wanting to speak to someone who has gone through the same thing as you, Mr. Matsuzaki," Kanou said. "Would you consider registering as a member? We're actually hosting a gathering in Saitama in the end of March. If you could come out for that event, I'm sure you'll be able to hear the stories of people who have been through the same ordeal."

Oe immediately signed up. He received information about the gathering by e-mail the next day, and he registered to participate. The gathering was on March 27. He still had two weeks ahead of him, and it was two days before his three-month time limit.

Even if Oe were to participate in this group's gathering, there was no guarantee that Douno was even part of the group. Even if Douno was registered, there was no guarantee that he would come to this gathering. At worst, Oe would come away with nothing. There was a possibility of finding Douno, but it was a mere possibility. Oe continued to sift through city halls for one that Douno had worked at, and contacted other support groups for the falsely accused. However, every inquiry to city hall was met with disappointment. As for support groups, only SVFAM seemed to be active enough to hold regular gatherings.

All the while Oe was hellbent on finding Douno, his daughter received an offer of admission to a national university. His wife, with whom he had barely conversed these past few days, reported to him in a clerical way.

"Miharu has successfully been admitted to — University," she said, just as Oe was about to leave for work. Oe had resigned himself to sending her to a private university, so news of her being accepted into a national school was a great relief to him.

"That's great. I knew Miharu could do it if she put her mind to it," Oe said enthusiastically. His wife responded in sharp contrast.

"I thought you didn't care about your daughter," she said in an oddly formal tone.

"Of course I care," he retorted.

"So you say." With this last offending comment, his wife turned her back to him. Her distant attitude bothered Oe slightly, but now was not the time to be appeasing his wife. If he did not find Douno by March 29th, he would be reported for fraud.

Oe pondered every spare moment he had. He deduced what Douno might do. Oe finally realized that his dire situation and impending doom were not the only reasons why the search consumed him—he was also thoroughly hooked on the search for Douno itself, deadline and all. The exhilaration of finding a lead was something Oe had long forgotten over the course of his lengthy career.

On Saturday, March 27, Oe participated in the gathering as Taketoshi Matsuzaki. His wife stopped him before he left the house.

"I have something I need to tell you tonight," she said. Oe assumed it was about their daughter's university admissions fee, tuition, and other such things.

"I don't know what time I'll be back. Can we talk about this next time?" Oe managed to defer the topic, all the while feeling just a little bit weary of it all.

Oe arrived an hour early at the hotel in Omiya, Saitama, where the gathering was to be held. It was a small venue, like an extension of a business hotel. Oe had researched the scale and size of this event beforehand, but he was nevertheless relieved upon seeing the real thing. A hotel like this, with only one entrance, was much easier to stake out than a luxury hotel with multiple entrances and exits. The only fault he could find was that the entire lobby, which was small like the rest of the hotel, could easily be seen from the reception desk. However, his stakeout was not going to be several days long. Most likely the people at the front desk would only think of him as a loitering customer. Oe had actually wanted to stake out the venue entrance, but the place was cramped and there were no chairs nearby. He would end up making himself conspicuous if he lingered for an hour or more. The last thing Oe wanted to do was leave some sort of impression on Douno, who was possibly attending this gathering as well.

Oe sat on the sofa in the lobby and pretended to read the newspaper while observing the people coming in. Kitagawa's sketch was already engraved into his memory. Thirty minutes before the gathering was to begin, there was a sudden surge of people passing through the lobby towards the elevators. Oe waited it out until five minutes before the event started, but no man resembling the sketch appeared. He wrapped up his stakeout in the lobby and took the elevator to the fourth floor, where the gathering was being held. Everyone had already gone in, and the only people at the check-in desk were Oe and a young man who looked like the attendant. Since registration was already done beforehand by e-mail or postcard, all one had to do was write his name on the list to check in. There was a minute left before the gathering was to start.

"Oh, yeah," Oe said loudly after writing his name. "I'd like to see if Mr. Saito is here. Mind if I look at the list?" He put on an act of being a pushy man as he grabbed the name list without permission. The young man in charge looked clearly annoyed, but since there was no one else there to do his job, he did not attempt to childishly snatch the list back.

Oe flipped the pages backwards from where he had written his name. *Douno, Douno*. Oe focused all of his mental faculties on the name list. Finally, on the first page with today's date, on the fifth line, he located the name he had been searching for: Takafumi Douno. His fingers shook. Oe had had nothing to back up his claim; this whole investigation had been based on his deductions—but he had been right!

"It's starting soon. Please go inside," the man said to him. Oe thrust the name list back at the young man and stepped quickly into the room. It was not very large. Upon counting the number of long meeting tables and chairs, he guessed there were about sixty participants or so.

The room was nearly filled, but there were a few empty seats here and there. Instead of sitting down, Oe stood at the very back looking out over the entire room. He was unable to find the man from where he stood.

During a brief gap in the programme, Oe took a seat in the middle of the room. It was the very opposite of his place at the back of the room, and he could see people's faces much more clearly. Despite his scrutinizing eye, he spotted no man with Douno's face. At the halfway point of the programme, there was a fifteen-minute break. Oe immediately hurried to the front and looked out across the room. He found no face which matched the sketch in his mind.

Before long, the break was over, and Oe was forced to resume his seat. Douno was here, yet Oe could not find him. He began to feel a slight onset of panic. Why wasn't he able to find the man? What if Kitagawa's sketch actually did not resemble Douno, and it had been a completely useless lead?

The gathering was over in about two hours. Oe immediately exited the room, then leaned against a nearby pillar to watch for a man resembling Douno to come out. He checked each and every person carefully, and even remained until the doors to the room were locked, but he did not spot a man that matched the sketch.

He had failed. As soon as the fact hit him, Oe's mind turned blank at the shock of missing his biggest chance. But he knew standing here in a stupor would do nothing. The gathering had ended at five in the evening. If Douno lived far away and had come out to participate in this meeting, there was a chance he would be staying the night. Oe hastily took the elevator down to the first floor and headed straight for the reception desk.

"Excuse me, I think there's a Takafumi Douno staying at this hotel. We were supposed to meet in the lobby, but he hasn't shown up. He's not picking up his cell, either. Would you be able to call his room for me?" he asked.

"Just a moment, please," said the man at the reception desk as he operated the computer screen at his fingertips.

"You're sure it's Mr. Takafumi Douno?"

"Yes, Douno, that's him."

The man tilted his head in perplexity. "There's no one named Mr. Douno staying at this hotel, nor have there been any reservations for him."

"Hmm, that's strange. I wonder if I got the wrong hotel," Oe muttered loudly enough for the man to hear. He apologized, then walked away from the reception desk. Douno was not staying at this hotel, which meant he was planning to go home the same evening. Oe pressed a hand to his forehead. If he had missed Douno leaving the room, there was no hope for him. The gathering had ended forty minutes ago. It was a ten-minute walk to the closest station, Omiya Station. It was a three-minute walk to the bus stop. Douno had most likely already gotten on some form of transport. A stakeout at the station or the bus terminal would be meaningless now.

But no, there was still a possibility. It was a vague hour of the day, but if Douno's trip home was going to be a long one, perhaps he would take a meal on the way back. *The station—I'll head-first to the station.* Just as Oe was about to set off, he felt the presence of a knot of people near the elevators.

Oe turned around to see a group of about seven people in suits standing in front of the elevators. He spotted the young man at check-in among them, and his heart raced. Perhaps this group had something to do with the group, Support for Victims Falsely Accused of Molestation. Oe drew up against the wall and observed the approaching group.

The check-in attendant was in his twenties; the man beside him in his fifties; the man beside him in his thirties — Oe stared intently at that man. He wore a grey coat over a navy suit. His hair was grown out, but he somewhat resembled Kitagawa's sketch. No—he was a spitting image. Oe's heart hammered like an alarm bell, and a sheen of sweat coated his brow.

The group of seven, including Douno, stood chatting near the wall a little ways off from the reception desk, about five metres away from Oe. The man whom he suspected to be Douno stood with his back to him.

"So now we're heading over to the wrap-up dinner?" said the voice of the young man at check-in.

"Looks like it. Kimijima's made a reservation. Does anyone know where the restaurant is?"

The man in his fifties looked around at the group.

"I'm sorry, but I have to get going." Oe could see the man, who was probably Douno, bow his head slightly. "I said I would make it home today." The man spoke in a slow, mild manner.

"You're in Kanagawa, right, Douno?" the man in his fifties asked.

"Yes, I am," said the voice of the man with his back to Oe. Maybe it was him, it was probably him—now, he was most certain. That man was Douno.

Douno said his goodbyes to the group before leaving the hotel briskly. Oe began tailing him a distance away. He sent his heartfelt gratitude to the man in the lobby who had asked where Douno lived. Oe had no idea what method Douno would use to get home, but at least now he knew for certain where he was headed. Kanagawa.

Douno walked for about ten minutes before arriving at a Japan Rail station. He went straight inside the station building. There, he bought a small box of sweets and a stuffed toy rabbit about the size of one's hand. Once he finished his shopping, he headed for the ticket stands. Oe drew right up diagonally behind Douno and checked the price of the ticket Douno had bought. He quickly bought a ticket of the same price, and followed after him.

Douno proceeded to the platform and waited for about ten minutes before boarding the 18:33 train. There were a handful of empty seats in the non-reserved car, and Douno took a seat in the middle of the second car. Oe sat behind him, near the automatic doors. From this spot, he could keep a constant eye on Douno's head. Oe looked up the route map on his cell phone. This train was a direct line from Omiya bound for Odawara in Kanagawa. Judging by the price of the ticket, Douno was most likely to get off at Yokohama. That would make for a one-hour train ride. Oe was positive that the man would not get off before Yokohama, but sometimes targets did unexpected things. He fixed his eyes intently on the back of Douno's head.

When the train stopped at Ikebukuro, the few empty seats left filled up completely. Moments after the train began to move, a young mother with a child about three years old passed Oe's seat. The mother glanced left and right as they walked down the aisle. Both mother and child stopped about midway down. Douno had offered the mother his seat.

Douno exited into the passageway between the train cars. Oe panicked. There were still thirty minutes of travel time until Yokohama. Perhaps Douno had given up his seat simply out of kindness, but it was also possible he was planning to get off before Yokohama. Once Douno was in the passageway, Oe would not be able to check when he was getting off.

Oe's hesitation only lasted for a moment. He stood from his seat and headed to the passageway where Douno had gone. Douno was standing beside the handrail near the right-hand exit of the second car. Oe stood on the opposite side, near the left-hand exit. It was a complete failure in terms of tailing distance, but it would be impossible to see Douno in the alcove if Oe stood near the doors of the first car. It would also be unnatural for him to peer in at each stop to make sure Douno was still there.

In this case, it was natural enough just to stand near the opposite exit pretending he was just another passenger. Besides, if this mission was successful, he would never have to see Douno again.

A shuffling sound came from Douno's direction. Oe glanced over using just his eyes. Douno took out a small paperback book out of his bag and began to read while standing up. There was a cover on it, so Oe could not catch the title. Douno leaned against the wall of the car and swayed along with its movements as he continued to read in silence.

The sun went down, and Oe could see Douno's profile reflected in the darkened window pane on Oe's side. There were no facial characteristics that set Douno apart. His eyes, nose, and mouth were all of a harmless shape, settled in a harmless fashion across his face. He looked exactly

like the sketch. Though the man was not ugly, he could hardly be called good-looking; his impression was much too vague and hard to place.

It was hard to imagine from Douno's ordinary-looking profile that he would have had a relationship with a man in jail, much less manipulated or seduced him. Or was it another case of deceptive appearances?

What part of this man had attracted Kitagawa so much? What allure had Kitagawa found in him to make him want nothing else, to want to do nothing else?

If thinking didn't help Oe figure it out, no amount of staring probably could, either. He figured it was something he would never understand, and looked away from the face in the window.

The train stopped at a station. A cold draught came seeping into the passageway. There were more people getting on than off, and soon even the passageway became crowded. A young man with earphones on, who looked about college-age, stood across from Oe.

The temperature was chilly for March, and the heating was turned on in the train; however, it was slightly cooler in the passageway than in the car. Oe had only taken slight notice of the cold, but ever since sneezing twice in a row at the last stop, his nose would not stop running. If he sniffled too much, he would attract attention, so Oe held it in. But this time, his nose began to itch unbearably.

Before he could even attempt to control himself, Oe found himself releasing a spectacularly loud sneeze. As if the noise wasn't enough, Oe's covering his mouth with his hand resulted in him spraying snot out of his nose.

"Ew," the young man across from him wrinkled his brow in disgust. Oe felt himself turn red to his ears. He hastily unzipped his bag to find something to wipe his nose with, but lost his grip and ended up dropping his bag upside-down and spilling its contents everywhere. His digital camera and notebook went tumbling across the floor, and his ballpoint pen rolled out into the passageway. It could not get worse than this.

"Use this, if you like." As Oe knelt down to pick up his things, a pack of tissues was held out in front of him—the kind of tissues often handed out for free on the streets.

"I'm sorry. Thank you." Oe looked up, presuming it was the young man standing across from him. He froze when he saw who it actually was. Douno smiled briefly, then went back to the opposite exit.

The pack of tissues was from a consumer financing company. Oe remembered the tissues being handed out at Omiya Station, and Douno accepting a pack. Oe had been offered one, too, but had ignored the person out of annoyance.

The train bumped along as if this small incident had never happened. Oe finally recalled what Shiba had said about Douno being compassionate.

Douno got off the train at a station in Yokohama, just as Oe predicted. It was a little past seven-forty in the evening. Once out of the station, Douno headed straight for a bus terminal. There were three other people waiting below the placard showing the destination and time schedule.

Oe had already flubbed and left an impression on Douno by sneezing and receiving a tissue from him. If he boarded the same bus, Douno would probably not be suspicious of him, but he would definitely recognize him and think, "It's him again." Oe switched to tailing by taxi, and waited in the car until Douno boarded the bus. He used the zoom on his camera to take a few pictures of Douno. It wasn't necessary, but Oe thought he might as well do it since he was at a good distance. He was most certain that the man was Douno, but if he had photos, he would be able to make doubly sure about it.

Douno boarded the bus, then rode it for about fifteen minutes before getting off at a lonely, deserted bus stop. Oe continued to tail him at a distance closer than usual. This territory was new to him, and he did not have a good grasp of the area. On top of that, it was nightfall. If he lost Douno once, he was afraid he would never find him again.

Douno entered a dusky park, then suddenly vanished from Oe's view. Oe hurried to catch up, but he could not spot the man anywhere. There were multiple entrances into the park; perhaps Douno had used a side path. Oe could not bring himself to give up after having followed him this far. He did one round of the area, but could not find Douno after all.

Oe wanted to investigate the surrounding houses, but it was impossible to do this late at night. He was sorely disappointed at losing Douno halfway, but he had at least been able to identify what region Douno lived in. He also knew that Douno staffed the support group for falsely-accused gropers.

For today, Oe would go home and contact the person in charge of the support group website. He would claim he had found something left behind at the meeting venue which appeared to belong to Douno.

"I want to send it to him, so would you be able to tell me his address?" he would ask. Since they were fellow group members, anyway, Oe was sure they would tell him Douno's address.

Today he had not only left an impression in Douno's mind, but he had failed to track him down all the way to his house. Oe's performance today as a detective was in the gutters. However, he was happy to find the man he had previously thought impossible to locate. Oe was one step away now. If he could find out Douno's address, he would be forever relieved of the threat of being handed over to the police. Half of the weight was off his shoulders now. On the train back home, Oe reclined deeply in his seat and let out a long sigh of relief.

The train jostled and clattered along the tracks. Lights swept by in the dark window pane. The sight of Douno's face up close flitted across Oe's mind. Some attendees of the gathering had been in casual clothes, but Douno had been wearing a suit and tie. His hair was neatly groomed, and when he had handed Oe the pack of tissues, his fingernails had been trimmed neatly. Douno was most likely living a proper life. He had bought a souvenir and a stuffed toy rabbit—perhaps he had a wife and small child.

There was the man who searched blindly and intently out of the singular desire to see the other person again. Then, there was the man who lived a grounded life as if nothing had ever happened. Even though their paths had crossed once in the past, their ways were now clearly parted.

Did Douno wish to be found by Kitagawa? Did he intend to repeat his past homosexual relationship? What place did Kitagawa occupy in his heart?

If Oe told Kitagawa where the man lived, he would probably drop everything to go to Douno's side. There, he would see the reality of Douno with a wife and child. Then—then, what would happen?

It doesn't matter what happens. Oe did not have any other choice but to tell Kitagawa everything.

Lulled by the gentle bumping of the train, Oe slowly began to slip into unconsciousness. He decided to stop thinking of a future he could not imagine for the two.

Immediately after getting home, Oe wrote an e-mail to the person in charge of the support group. "When I attended the gathering, I picked up a card with the name 'Takafumi Douno' on it," he wrote. "I'd like to return it to him, in case it's something important. If he's a member, I'd like you

to tell me his address." In the morning, he received a reply. *There is someone by that name registered as a member. It is most likely him*, said the e-mail from the person in charge. *I will return it to him in person. Please mail it to our office.* "It will only be more hassle for you. I can send it directly," Oe wrote back. The person in charge wrote him a polite reply:

Under the Personal Information Protection Law, we are not allowed to give out addresses even between fellow members. I'm very sorry.

If he was unable to get information from them, Oe decided he had no choice but to head out to Yokohama again. With a residential map in hand, he would walk door-to-door within a generous three-hundred-metre vicinity of the park where he had lost sight of Douno. But it was already the twenty-eighth. He had two days, including today, until his deadline. Investigations like these, requiring eyes and footwork, tended to take longer than estimated. To be truthful, he was tempted to call for backup, but the chief did not know that Oe had given up his day off to search for Douno. Off days were off days; with most cases, there was no need to be devoted entirely to a case.

Upon thorough consideration, Oe decided to call Shiba. It was a Sunday, and apparently Shiba was off work, for he answered the phone himself.

"I found Takafumi Douno. I've narrowed it down to the region he's living in, but I need a couple more days to figure out his exact address. Would you extend our three-month deadline by three more days?" Oe pleaded.

That afternoon, Oe headed out to a coffee shop near the closest station to his office. He sipped a coffee while he waited, and momentarily Shiba appeared with Kitagawa in tow. Kitagawa was wearing his usual white shirt and black pants. He was not wearing the black coat anymore. His cheeks, which had been getting hollower with each meeting as if the air was being sucked out of them, looked a lot more fleshed out now.

Kitagawa was unaware of what happened between Shiba and Oe. He appeared surprised to find Oe was the man they were meeting.

"Oh, Mr. Detective. What's going on?"

Shiba, who stood beside him, thumped him on the shoulder. "This is the guy I've wanted you to see. See, Oe is my cousin. We bumped into each other the other day. We went out for drinks, and lo behold, your name comes up in the conversation. You wouldn't believe how surprised I was. I'd heard your story before, but I had no idea you were talking about Oe. Apparently he married into his wife's family and changed his last name."

Oe and Shiba were not cousins, nor had he changed his last name from marrying into his wife's family. Shiba ushered Kitagawa into a seat. The man sat down across from Oe with a dubious look on his face.

"It really is a small world, like they say."

Shiba spoke naturally enough to make his lie sound like truth, and grinned at Oe in a friendly manner. He was quite the actor.

"You know how I know a lot about your situation, right, Kitagawa? That's why I asked Oe to keep an eye out for Douno even though the investigation was over."

Throughout the conversation, Kitagawa still appeared not to understand why he was here, nor what was about to happen next as he gave brief responses with a blank face.

The waitress brought them glasses of water. The two of them ordered coffee.

"I was concerned about you myself, Mr. Kitagawa," Oe said. "You were very dedicated to searching for him."

From his bag, Oe took out a memo folded in half.

"On other business, I met someone who works in my field... I can't tell you the details, since it's an issue of privacy, but... he happened to know Mr. Douno."

The man across from him widened his eyes.

"Mr. Kitagawa, you're a lucky man. Mr. Douno is in Kanagawa right now. I don't know his exact address yet, but he's in this district of N City... he lives in the vicinity of this park. There's no mistake about it."

Oe took out a photocopy of the residential map, his own copy which he had shrunk to B5 size for his own investigative purposes. With a red ballpoint pen, he drew a circle around the predicted area, and coloured in the park where he had seen Douno vanish.

"You can keep this copy, Mr. Kitagawa. Here you go."

The long fingers which took the map from him seemed to be trembling. Kitagawa stared at the copy in his hands without even blinking.

"Ain't that nice, Kitagawa?" Shiba clapped him on the shoulder. Kitagawa folded up the copy into a small square and clenched it in his right hand. But soon he unclenched his hand again and peered inside. He did the same thing twice.

"That was a long search, huh? I guess things turn up when they turn up."

Despite having threatened Oe with reporting the fraud to the police, and having made him throw everything into searching for Douno, Shiba seemed to emphasize how chance had played a role.

Kitagawa, having finally acquired the location of the man he had been searching for, neither jumped up in glee nor broke into a smile. He remained with his head bowed, looking stunned.

"...I feel like I'm dreaming." He vigorously scratched his head of short hair with his right hand. "What is this?"

Shiba gently shook the hand he still had on Kitagawa's shoulder.

"What's what? Pull yourself together. This isn't a dream. You're going to see Douno soon."

"...My saviour." Trembling slightly, Kitagawa repeated the same words. "My saviour," he murmured. He lifted his face, and looked Oe in the eye.

"I don't know much about religion, but starting today, you're my God."

Kitagawa stood from his seat and bowed deeply to Oe.

"Please lift your face, Mr. Kitagawa. You're exaggerating, calling me God. It was a coincidence that we were able to find Mr. Douno, after all."

"But if it wasn't for you, I might've never seen Douno again. —Hey, isn't there anything you want?"

Kitagawa placed his left palm on his chest.

"Tell me what you want. I'll give you anything other than my life, if you'll just ask."

Shiba yanked his shirt, and Kitagawa collapsed back into his seat.

"Don't be so abrupt," Shiba said. "Oe wouldn't know how to answer that. You can take your time and think about thank-yous later."

"Oh, right... that's how it works..." Kitagawa scratched the back of his head. Oe felt some guilt towards being called "God" by a man he had tricked and syphoned money from, despite the fact that Kitagawa himself was unaware.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Oe took out his digital camera from his bag. "I have a few photos of Mr. Douno. Would you like to take a look?"

Kitagawa hesitantly lifted Oe's camera from his hands as if it were a fragile piece of equipment. He stared at the photo of Douno in the display as if to bore holes into it with his gaze.

With his finger, he stroked the display over and over.

"....Takafumi," he murmured, then stood up. "Takafumi, Takafumi, Takafumi," he repeated like a child, his face alight in a smile. With the map firmly grasped in his hand, he proceeded to burst out of the coffee shop.

Through the window, they could see the man's tall figure running down the sidewalk. It grew smaller into the distance, and in moments, he was gone.

The two men left behind in the coffee shop sat across from each other, looking somewhat at a loss of what to do.

"He ran off like a bullet," Shiba muttered as if to himself. The man was long gone, but Shiba's eyes were still trained on the spot down the road.

"Should we have let him go? He doesn't even know the exact address."

"If he's okay with that, it's okay." Shiba extracted a cigarette and lit it.

"I didn't tell Mr. Kitagawa about this, but I think Mr. Douno is married with a child."

"Uh-huh," Shiba said, not looking particularly surprised.

"Do you think it would result in some kind of dispute over there?"

"That's their problem."

Shiba was the very man who had made Oe search for Douno. There was a chance Douno's family life would be disrupted and ruined, yet Shiba talked as if it were none of his business.

"Douno might find it a fine pain in the neck to deal with," Shiba said, "but until Kitagawa gets to see him, the man won't be able to move forward or back."

Shiba let out a short puff of smoke. Although Oe had been able to find Douno within the promised three months, he had not been able to pinpoint his address. Shiba's decision had been to tell Kitagawa anyway.

"I guess I should keep searching for Mr. Douno's address as well?" Oe said.

"I don't need you anymore. If Kitagawa knows that much already, he'll find out the rest on his own."

The search for Douno was over, which meant the promise would be kept. Oe couldn't help but make sure, just in case.

"Um, what you said in the beginning about going to the police..."

The man glanced at him. "You kept your promise. I won't report you."

Relief overcame Oe as the tenseness was lifted from his shoulders. Now he had nothing to fear, or to worry about.

"As for the expenses for Douno's search, you can pay that out of the amount you pinched from Kitagawa."

Oe was prepared for Shiba's statement. His actual expenses would probably exceed 565,000 yen, but in turn, he had avoided becoming involved with the police, as well as maintained his social position. In that aspect, the extra expense was well worth it.

Shiba continued to smoke in silence. There was only one thing about this man that bothered Oe.

"Couldn't you have told Mr. Kitagawa directly about Mr. Douno instead of me?"

Only Shiba's eyes moved to acknowledge him.

"That way, I wouldn't have been called God and given such misdirected credit. You would have earned that gratitude instead, Mr. Shiba."

You must be kidding me, Shiba spat as he scowled.

"Why would you say that? I think you deserve to be thanked by Kitagawa more than

anyone. You might've threatened me, but as a result you were able to find Douno in the end."

Shiba maintained a disgruntled silence and brought his cold coffee to his lips. Oe had only asked the question out of genuine curiosity and had not meant to say anything offensive. Faced with a sudden change for the worse in the man's mood, he was at a complete loss of what to do.

Now that their transaction was complete, Oe had no reason to be here. He wondered if he should just head home, and glanced at his watch. It was a little past two in the afternoon.

"—In the days up to Douno's release," the man spoke, just as Oe was about to propose going home. "Kitagawa was in the secure cell. So Douno tried to give me his address. Said he wanted me to tell Kitagawa when he got out. That's when I told Douno, 'If you're not prepared to live the rest of your life with him, don't even bother.'"

Shiba clicked his tongue angrily.

"It might work in prison, but things like that never work out once you're outside. It doesn't take much thinking to figure that out, does it? So when I warned him, Douno didn't say anything. He was a guy who understood things like that, and I think he made a fair choice not to tell."

Shiba fidgeted irritably in his chair. It creaked with his movement.

"I still don't think I did anything wrong. But when I started working at the same factory as Kitagawa, and found out that for the past four years he'd been putting all of his wages into searching for Douno, I just couldn't sit still anymore. No matter how many times I told him to give up, he wouldn't. That's why I thought, if he could see Douno married with a family, and see reality for what it actually was, he'd finally go and find another way to live."

Shiba's gaze shifted to the window. Of course, Kitagawa was no longer there. Perhaps he was already on a train to Kanagawa.

"If I'd just told Kitagawa Douno's address without meddling, he probably wouldn't have had to waste four years searching for him. As if it's not enough that he's spent his best, youngest years rotting in prison... just when you think he's finally out—"

His gaze, which had been directed outside, came back to settle on Oe in a glare.

"He ends up working his ass off to the point of collapse to pile all this money onto a detective who's a fraudulent bastard. 'He reminds me of Douno,' the guy says, without suspecting a thing. You two don't even look alike. Is it your voice? Your mannerisms? Whatever it is, I don't care. A guy who reminds Kitagawa of Douno has no right to be tricking him."

Oe suddenly understood why Shiba had not told Kitagawa about him.

"...It hurts to be betrayed by someone you trust."

Shiba fell silent, as if he had worn himself out talking. It was a spring afternoon, and the gentle rays of the sun poured down on the table. A coffee shop employee, apparently noting their empty cups, picked both of them up and took them away.

"Hey, Mr. Oe. Do you have any idea? What kind of guy is Kitagawa exactly? Love between two men? Bullshit. But that fixation... can you call that love, too? It's a load of unwanted trouble for everyone else, frankly. It's not right. Oh, I don't care anymore. Whatever happens to those two is none of my business. I've got nothing to do with it," Shiba spat as he looked down.

"As for Douno, he was the kind of guy you'd find anywhere. Anyone would wonder what was so special about him."

Once out the coffee shop doors, there was a pastry shop to the immediate right. Oe bought three pieces of shortcake there, remembering he had not done anything yet to celebrate his daughter's admission to university.

He also remembered his wife saying she had something to talk about. Oe's spirits

dampened as he figured it was most likely about admissions fees and tuition. However, since his search for Douno had been concluded, he understood he had to sit down and have this talk properly.

Oe thought to himself on his way home. He had a hunch that the Shiba's anger and threats towards him and Shiba's own regret were two sides of the same coin. Shiba's belief that he had torn Kitagawa and Douno's relationship asunder had driven him to action.

Oe had perceived through talking with Shiba that the man carried a considerable burden in his heart over not telling Kitagawa. However, Oe believed Shiba had no obligation to tell Kitagawa the address in the first place. Douno only had to pick Kitagawa up the day he was released. This was not Shiba's fault; this was all due to Douno's choice.

Shiba had said he did not know whether Kitagawa's attachment was love or something else. *Wait, I remember*, Oe thought to himself. Kitagawa had likened his relationship with Douno to the relationship between Oe and his wife. He had said something along the lines of his feelings for Douno being as strong as those between a married couple.

Feelings harboured in an unusual environment like a prison, in a relationship that did not even last a year, were not even worth comparing to the love between a married man and wife, whose feelings steadily accumulated and grew like falling snow. Kitagawa did not understand this.

As Shiba put it, Kitagawa would be faced with reality once he met Douno. But whatever emotional outburst that might happen, or the atrocity that might ensue, was out of Oe's range of responsibility now.

When Oe arrived home to his apartment, it was as silent and still as the bottom of the sea. He vaguely remembered his wife had been home when he left for the coffee shop in the afternoon, but he was not sure. His head had been too full with thinking about meeting Kitagawa and telling him the truth that he had not had the room for anything else.

It was Sunday today; perhaps his wife and daughter had gone out. Come to think of it, there had been no shoes in the doorway. As he entered the living room with the box of cakes in hand, he found a piece of paper left on the kitchen table. He peered at it, wondering if it was a note explaining their absence—then his mind went blank.

Divorce papers, filled in with his wife's name and stamp, glared silently back at him.